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ROCKY MOUNTAIN AL; or, Nugget Nell, the Waif of the Range.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM"—Major Sam S. Hall,

AUTHOR OF "DIAMOND DICK," "THE LONE STAR GAMBLER," "THE TERRIBLE TONKAWAY," "KIT CARSON," "BIG FOOT WALLACE," ETC., ETC.



THE BLACK STEED OF ROCKY MOUNTAIN AL, WITH A SNORT OF MADNESS AND FURY, SPRUNG INTO THE AIR.

Rocky Mountain Al;

OR,

Nugget Nell, the Waif of the Range.

A Story of New Mexico.

BY BUCKSKIN SAM,

(MAJOR SAM. S. HALL.)

AUTHOR OF "THE SERPENT OF EL PASO," "THE BRAZOS TIGERS," "DIAMOND DICK," "KIT CARSON, JR.," ETC.

PROLOGUE.

A YOUNG man and a maiden, arm in arm, are walking slowly along the very verge of the Palisades of the Hudson.

It is bright silvery moonlight, and the view is weirdly beautiful.

Far below rolls the cerulean river, dotted here and there with white sails; and a stately steamer glides up the stream, the brilliant lamps from its cabin windows being but twinkling points of light.

Afar to the north, east and west spreads a scene that would chain the eye of an artist until tired nature closed his weary lids.

From the dizzy height the Rhine of America seems like a huge serpent, stretching its lazy length along the earth.

To the south, not more than a rifle-shot distant, stands a stately mansion, with extensive gardens, shrubbery and outbuildings. Everything around and about it denotes wealth, prosperity and happiness. But the beauties of the surroundings are unnoticed by the young man and his fair companion.

Naught but their own words, thoughts and presence, occupies their attention.

The youth is apparently about one-and twenty years of age, tall, slender in form, and with dark hair and eyes, and jet-black side-whiskers and mustache.

There is an honest, manly look about him which is manifested in every word and movement. The maiden is sweet sixteen, and is fair, with golden wavy hair. Small in stature is she but most beautiful, lovable, and graceful as the wild fawn of the prairie.

Their words will explain the relations between them, and their connection with our story will, in due time, be developed.

"Herbert, darling Herbert!" said the girl, with tears in her eyes: "I know we must part, and now, for I am convinced that Lucretia Lane is, at this very moment, spying from her window. Oh, Herbert! if you knew the life I am forced to lead, your heart would bleed for me!"

"Nellie, do not pain me further by a repetition of your trials. You will unman me, and unfit me for the struggles ahead. Would to God that your father had never married that woman! Then her daughter would not now be domineering over my darling."

"But, cheer up, Nellie! I have graduated from Columbia, after a long and tedious course of study, and I now start for Colorado and New Mexico, in order that I may gain a practical knowledge of that branch of study, mineralogy, which I have made a specialty. I hope soon to be able to take you from your father's roof, and to protect you as my own loved wife. But I fear that Carl Cole, Lucretia's lover, will conspire with her to cause your father to make a will in her favor. He is ill and weak and you must guard him, for he is in danger from that guilty and unscrupulous pair."

"I am afraid your suspicions are well grounded, Herbert; and I shall keep watch of them."

"Lucretia has more than once intimated that my father is insane, and ought to be sent to an asylum."

"I am weak and powerless. Oh, Herbert! what shall I do? If they should succeed in spiriting him away, I can never remain under that roof alone with Lucretia; for I should ever be in fear that, like another of her name—the Lucretia Borgia of history—she would poison me!"

"If worst comes to worst, Nellie, come to me, at Denver or Santa Fe. I will write you often. You have jewels of considerable value, I know. Secrete them. Then, should matters assume a desperate shape, dispose of a portion of them, and fly to me. But be sure that Carl and Lucretia know nothing of your whereabouts and mine."

"When you write, be sure and insert my middle name. Write it in full—Herbert Howard Ives. Then there will be no mistake in delivery, wherever I may be located. You will not forget this?"

At this moment a taunting feminine laugh reached their ears from the shrubbery, and caused Nellie Belzer to shudder and cling tightly to the arm of her lover, who exclaimed, quickly:

"Heavens! Nellie, that is Lucretia's laugh. She is spying on our movements. God grant that no ill is in the future for you and me! But that sounds in my ears like the laugh of a fiend. It is ominous, I fear, portending evil—dread evil—to both of us."

"Come, darling," he said, halting in the screen of a clump of bushes as he spoke; "we must part at once. There is no use in prolonging this heart-torture. One kiss—a last kiss—until God permits us to meet again!"

"Oh Herb! darling Herb! I shall die without you!" And Nellie clung trembling to her lover, while the tears ran down her fair cheeks.

Catching her frantically in his arms, and pressing her for a moment to his breast, the young man kissed her quickly upon brow and cheek, and eye and lip; then placing her upon a garden-seat, he rushed like a madman up the river, a long wail of anguish from the girl cutting through his heart like a knife, causing his teeth to set and his hands to clench so tightly that the nails cut into his flesh.

Thus they parted—those two; one, noble, true, and brave; the other, as fair and angelic a maiden as the sun ever shone upon—parted! each to suffer untold sorrow, each to prove their love for the other in ways that would have tried the souls of the iron-hearted knights of old.

A half-mile or more Herbert Ives proceeded, when out from a clump of trees sprang a young man, but a couple of years his senior, and with him an extremely handsome youth of perhaps fifteen, each grasping a hand of Herbert, as the first exclaimed:

"Well, Herb, have you met my cousin Nellie?"

"I have seen her, George Belzer; and I have bidden her farewell. God grant that it be not for long!"

"Brother Charley, you ought not to have accompanied us. You are not used to being out in the night air."

"Don't you fret, Herb. I shall be forced to get used to it, and to sleeping out on the plains as well. What is there now to delay us? Shall we start to-morrow?"

"Boys, let me tell you—this was my most trying parting, and I shall not forget it soon. Lucretia Lane was in the shrubbery, watching. We heard her taunting laugh."

"Don't mind her, Herb," said George. "She can do Nell no harm. Cheer up! To-morrow we start for the wilds of the Rocky Mountains; you to hammer quartz in your scientific researches, Charley and I to enjoy ourselves hunting and fishing. In six months, if all is well, we will stand again in this spot, and then you can claim Nellie as your bride."

"But come; we must catch the down-river train. Cheer up, I repeat, old boy; for the future promises wealth and pleasure in abundance. Farewell to the palisades!"

CHAPTER I.

"ALL, SAVE THE SPIRIT OF MAN, IS DIVINE."

NIGHT on the prairie! A moonlight night, and the broad expanse, broken only toward the west, where, serrated against the sky, the Rocky Mountains stretch north and south, a dark adamant mass—the backbone of the American continent.

There is naught on that broad plain that moves or shows life except a solitary horseman, whose animal plods along without word or spur from the rider.

The latter grips his saddle-born as if to support himself on his horse. He is an aged man, bent with care more than with years, and his hair is entirely gray. His features are drawn as if from long-continued anguish—anguish that has been almost unendurable.

He has a long gray beard, and his eyes are deep set, the gray brows curling over them.

His gaze is bent downward, and there is a far-away look in his glassy eyes, which seem to be without the proper lubricating fluid to render them natural in appearance. He appears oblivious to his surroundings—oblivious of time and place.

Not even a bird of night soars or flaps a wing; not even a coyote sneaks over the plain. Naught but that broken-down, aged man, with the silvery locks.

His apparel is rich and costly, and the direction whence he has come would indicate that he was from south of Fort Union—from San Miguel, probably—and not only this, but that he must have left that town long after night-fall. The animal that he rides is one of great price, but it is now fagged and broken by over-travel. The trappings of the horse are of the finest and most costly workmanship.

All these things taken together, it is somewhat surprising that he seems to aim now at striking the Great Divide at a point where no man lives—where the grizzly and cinnamon bears prowl for prey—where the big-horn springs from height to height and across the dizzy chasms—where the merciless Apache shoots out from rocky gorge, upon his wild-eyed steed, the war-cry on his lips, the signal of torture and carnage!

Yet on he plods; still with that insane stare and listless mien—a strange picture on that broad, level, moonlit plain.

Still on, until far upward, rise the rocky peaks, until the black, irregular lines in the range show yawning chasms; until the steed, scenting the beasts of the night, throws up his head with a snort of apprehension; but not one

whit does the rider change his position or his gaze.

Through dark shades, between towering and jagged walls, over bright moonlit spaces, along soft and sandy wash-outs, and flinty beds of canyons, where the iron-shod hoofs of the horse awaken steely echoes in the wild solitudes, on he goes, seemingly into the bowels of the range.

But we will leave this strange rider, and shoot ahead of him into the deep, winding gorge, whither his horse has wandered, and fly on the wings of thought to the terminus of the grand, adamant-bound gorge.

It ends abruptly. There is a wall of rock a hundred feet high, on either side; the end shelving upward a thousand feet, in rough, broken cedar-dotted rock. To the east is the outlet of the gorge; where, for a pistol-shot, it is straight to the view.

The bright moon shines down, and illumines this portion; showing, as it does, a most terrible sight, heart-rending to an observer.

In the middle of a circle is driven a stake, and to this is bound a man—a white man, of perhaps thirty years of age, strong and well developed, having a fine physique and handsome in face.

Long, dark brown hair partially shades the deep, dark eyes, that flash defiance even now.

A luxuriant mustache and imperial enhance his manly beauty, and add to the fearless, taunting derision that darts from his eyes.

His upper garments have been torn from his form, displaying his broad, white breast and sinewy arms.

Thus we see him fast bound; his head thrown slightly back over the top of the stake defiantly—a picture of heroism seldom seen, especially when we consider his savage surroundings.

A fire burns near at hand, and some half a dozen Indian ponies are secured to cedars; while a magnificent black blooded stallion paws the earth, and at times flashes glances toward the young man at the stake, as if knowing that something was wrong—as if he knew that his master was in deadly peril.

Arms and equipments lay carelessly around. A Winchester rifle and a brace of Colt's revolvers leaned against a cedar. They evidently belonged to the man at the stake, who has, judging from his condition and surroundings, glanced across the sights of these weapons for the last time.

For, circling around the heroic captive, are half a dozen paint-daubed Apache braves—braves, did I say? God save the mark!

Bars of white gypsum ran across the brow, and down the cheeks and neck of each; a daub of vermilion being beneath each eye, and the same between the central bars of white gypsum on the breast.

Blue, red, and black feathers, broken and besmeared with grease and dirt, with small tin and silver ornaments mingled with their coarse black hair.

Around and around in spasmodic hop, their arms thrown wildly in the air, an unearthly, fiendish chant issuing from their brutal lips, they were a sight to appall the stoutest heart, curdle the blood, and paralyze the brain of all but one man in ten thousand; and that man stands there at the stake, soon to die by slow torture, to have his scalp torn from his head, to have his flesh scarified with flints, and burning splints of pine thrust into the wounds, to be disemboweled while yet alive—and all this he knows.

All this he knows; yet the glance of his eye falters not, his proud head bends not, but a heroism as unnatural as the merciless cruelty of his captors is still manifest. There is a sneer on his lip, a defiance in his dark eyes, that commands the admiration even of the savage Apaches.

Still on, the hideous torturers whirl and hop, their chant ending in exultant whoop and yell; for, well they know that they cannot be heard from the plain, even were their enemies there. And this is improbable; and, at all events, a spy is on the lookout from the mountain-side to warn them.

The captive knows that his time approaches; but he has not been idle every moment that he has been tied to the tree. When unobserved, he has exerted his steely sinews to the utmost, to stretch and loosen the cords that bind him.

While the Apaches were feasting before they began their terrible dance, preliminary to the torture, he has, as he judges, succeeded in so loosening the thongs, that he hopes, when the critical moment arrives, he may be able to wrench himself free.

The savages know nothing of his great strength, for they sprung upon him when he, from following their trail, had become so exhausted from prostration and loss of rest, that he had been forced to sleep.

But, should he now break free—what chance is there for him? How can he hope to cope successfully with half-a-dozen Apache warriors?

His one hope is in bounding to his rifle. With his Winchester, which has fifteen cartridges in the magazine, and the secret of which he believes his foes to be ignorant of, he feels confident of winning the fight. At the very least,

he can die, battling with his red enemies, and thus evade the terrible torture now awaiting him.

Brave and fearless though he is, he cannot avoid shuddering internally, now that one by one, as the painted fiends whirl past him, they halt for an instant, and each brandishes his scalping-knife in his face.

It is a sign that the scalp will soon be torn from his head. Well he knows this, for he has witnessed such scenes more than once before to-day.

Suddenly, just as the captive is about to endeavor, by one of superhuman effort, to wrench himself free, knowing that when the red devils next whirled around him, the torture would begin, his steed gave out a sounding neigh, that proclaimed the approach of others of his kind—a neigh of welcome.

The sound was rightly interpreted by the Apaches, well versed as they are in all that pertains to a horse, and the wild dance ceased. Each brave stood in his tracks for an instant, in amazement, not unmixed with apprehension.

It was only an instant. Then, all rushed for their weapons, and ranged themselves, three on either side of the captive. At that moment, around the curve below, and into full view—up to certain death, unless some unforeseen and unlooked-for event providentially occurred to prevent—ambled the fagged steed, bearing its gray-haired rider; the old man still gripping his saddle-horn, still gazing with glassy stare downward upon his wrinkled hands, his bridle-rein still flapping to and fro!

On came the steed, unguided, bedecked with the showy trappings, bearing its master to a horrible death.

The Apaches gazed in superstitious awe and the captive forgot for the moment his own terrible condition. Then at once he realized that there was now a chance opened for him, providentially, to escape death.

Most mysteriously had the torture been interrupted, and he saw hope in this fact alone.

Immediately he decided that the stranger was demented; that he probably had been lost on the prairie and, for want of food and water and being old and infirm, he had gone temporarily insane.

The condition of the horse favored this hypothesis; but, however it might be, there was no time for speculation. Life and death hung on the moment—life and death for himself and the gray-haired stranger.

Directly up to the black steed ambled the new-comer, both neighing, and with seeming pleasure; while the Indian ponies snorted and pranced about in their endeavor to break loose. As the horse of the old man came within ten feet of the other, it halted, as if suspicious and timid as to a nearer approach.

The Apaches walked several paces from their captive, at a loss to account for the sudden appearance of this old white man, who had, so to speak, walked directly into their clutches.

Just then the apparently dazed old man, probably from the fact that his horse had halted, glanced upward, and then around him.

He saw the captive bound to the stake—the latter, by a glance and a motion of his head, recalling him to life and action.

The next moment, just as the Indians were bounding to the rear of the old man's horse to prevent retreat, the captive, concentrating all his tremendous strength for the effort, burst free from his bonds, sprung like an arrow from the bow to the spot where lay his arms, at the same time yelling:

"Jump! Jump, for your life, old man, and take cover with me! Jump, or you are lost!"

Suddenly the old man seemed to be indued with new life. He obeyed the order to the letter. Bounding behind the cedars that lined the wall of the gulch, he was followed at once by the self-released captive.

With loud-sounding yells of amazement and rage, the Apaches rushed, weapons in hand, to the cedars, but before they had passed over half the distance the Winchester, of which mention has been made, began to be heard.

And the weapon spoke to the point. With horrid death-yells, three of the warriors sprung into the air, and fell dead upon the bed of the gulch.

Undaunted, the others rushed on, with vengeful war-cries, into the cedars. Then followed a thrashing of bushes, another gurgling death-ory, and the next moment, out into the moonlight, battling for life, hand to hand, steel to steel, struggled the two white men, each clutched by a burly brave.

No single man, however, could stand under the powerful strokes of that bare arm, so recently stripped for torture. With a loud cry of triumph, he made one terrific downward cut, that cleft his savage opponent from breast to thigh.

Forward fell the Apache, with but a gurgling outcry in place of the sounding death-whoop.

Springing to the spot where the old man was now rolling over and over in the clutches of the one surviving warrior, the recent captive, bleeding from his wounds, grasped the Indian by the hair and buried his knife in his throat.

At this moment he discovered another brave coming, on the run, up the gulch.

Back to the thicket, and regaining his rifle, he drew bead on the instant and pulled trigger.

The Apache threw up his arms, and with a yell fell to earth.

Staggering to the side of the old man he now saw that the latter was either dead or had fainted. Reeling and swaying like a mountain pine in a norther, he too fell backward, his face upturned to the moonlight, as was that of the gray-haired man, and both bespattered with blood.

A horrible scene was that now at the head of the gulch, and the moon, as if appalled at the sight, rolled backward behind a cloud.

Darkness ruled the gulch. The snort and prancing of blood-terrified steeds was now all that told of any presence of life within those natural adamantine walls.

CHAPTER II.

A CHILD NO LONGER.

SOME two weeks previous to the events recorded in our opening chapter the mail coach from San Miguel entered the Main Plaza of Santa Fe, with bugle blowing merrily, six spanking nags jerking the old "hearse" along, making but a momentary halt at the post-office, to throw out the "cow-hides," and then on to the Grand Central Hotel.

This latter institution, by the way, was far from as "grand" as its name would lead one unused to border travel to conclude.

As they came to a halt the driver, Jim Harding, gave a yell that would have put an Apache to shame, as he thus apostrophized a loitering stable-man:

"Wake up there, Mose, and open the coach! I'm as stiff as the hearse-pole, and I don't allow to strike dirt till I get to the stables."

Mose at once complied, and with slow movements the "insides" crawled out from their cramped positions, more asleep than awake, and with difficulty made their way into the hotel, which was but two stories in height.

There was, however, one exception as far as showing extreme weariness was concerned. This was a lady, closely veiled, but evidently young in years, for she sprang nimbly from the stage and stepped into the hotel as though she had suffered no inconvenience from her journey.

The admiring eyes of Jim Harding followed her, as he snapped his long whip and drove to the stables, with a puzzled expression upon his manly countenance.

The hour was yet early, and there was no one astir in the ancient Spanish town, except a few whose potations on the previous night necessitated an early dram; their nervous condition preventing anything like sleep.

With these thirsty citizens, however, we have now nothing to do.

The young lady, we have mentioned, proceeded at once to the office, seating herself in a retired corner until the sleepy night-clerk had disposed of the other passengers.

While this official was absent with the last guest, the lady stepped up to the office counter, and ran her finger down along the names of the arrivals by the previous stage.

Suddenly a shudder seemed to convulse her frame, as her eyes fell upon two names which seemed to be known to her. These names were:

"Mr. and Mrs. C. Cole, New York."

Catching up a pen, the lady hastily wrote, in such a manner that an observer would at once have concluded she was disguising her hand:

"Miss Belle Nelzer, Trinidad, Colorado."

She then paced back and forth until the reappearance of the clerk, when she requested to be assigned to a room at once; and this, in a voice so sweet and silvery, that the young man "hustled" himself around lively to accommodate her, seeming momentarily doubtful, for once in his life, of the fitness of the apartments at his disposal.

Soon, however, he decided, and politely requested the young lady to follow him.

Entering a narrow hallway at the head of the stairs, he opened the second door to the right, standing at it for a moment, as he asked, respectfully:

"Can I be of any service to you, Miss Nelzer? Is there anything you wish, after your journey?"

"I would thank you to send up my breakfast as soon as possible," was the reply. "A cup of coffee would be very acceptable."

"You shall have it immediately, Miss Nelzer. The cook has just gone down to the kitchen."

"Thanks," said the new arrival, briefly, as the clerk walked to the stairway, and she closed the door. She then passed to the window and drew the curtains.

These windows looked out upon the now deserted plaza, and a red tint in the Eastern sky began to denote the approach of coming day.

Throwing back her veil, the young lady gave one quick look around the square, and then walked hastily to the bedside, removing her hat. After bathing her face and eyes, the latter showing from their inflamed lids the marks of long weeping, she had the appearance of a young and beautiful girl, of not more than seventeen summers.

Having arranged her hair, and brushed the dust of travel from her apparel, she again approached the window, and gazed up at the blue sky, with a sadness in her expression which gave to her an appearance that was almost angelic.

At this moment there came a tap at the door, and the clerk entered in person, with a respectful bow, and a salver in his hand, upon which were coffee, mutton-chop, cakes and potatoes.

"This is the best we can do at present, Miss Nelzer," he said, as he walked quickly to the door, after having placed the tray upon a table.

"I am a thousand times obliged," was the sweet reply.

Again bowing gracefully, the clerk retired.

After partaking of her chop and coffee, Miss Nelzer again bathed her face, and then, her troubles seeming to come upon her afresh with overwhelming force, after striving in vain to throw the sad thoughts from her mind, she began to pace the apartment with nervous, impatient steps, muttering in low soliloquy:

"Oh, what shall I do? What shall I do? That terrible pair have traced me even to this wild border!"

"I fear I shall go insane. It seems like a dream more than a reality. Since my father disappeared, I fear I have not been quite myself."

"I am sure that Lucretia and Carl have incarcerated him in an asylum, as they threatened. Let me think it all over. First, I told papa my suspicions; and then what I had heard and knew of that female fiend's plans, and he laughed at me."

"Yes; he laughed, but I do not think he fully realized the perfidious character of his step-daughter."

"She is capable of anything—even murder—for I heard her propose to Carl to poison me, after they had put poor papa out of the way. Herbert promised to write me. I believe that he did write. I know he must have written, and Lucretia intercepted the letters. He told me, at parting, to come to him; and I have come, though the journey has been like a nightmare."

"Alone and unprotected. I have traveled more than two thousand miles. I have searched all the towns and camps from the Arkansas river to this city, and yet no trace of him. I know that Herb must be in New Mexico. Perhaps traveling among the mountains, and never coming near the towns."

"Oh, what shall I do? I know not where he is, nor how to communicate with him, and I am compassed with dangers. Lucretia and Carl will not hesitate to murder me, if they meet me here!"

"They know that I have come in search of Herbert, and hence they have followed me. When I am out of their way, a princely fortune is within their grasp; but I would gladly relinquish all claim now, and work for my bread, if they would let me have peace."

"Oh, God pity me! Pity and preserve me! If I only had papa with me, then I would find Herbert. I know I would—and we would then never, never go back to the Hudson. What is wealth, in comparison with peace and happiness? It is nothing!"

"But I shall yet find Herbert—I know I shall! I must, and I will find him if I have to traverse all the wild trails on both sides of the rocky range!"

"They have come to hunt me down. I thought I should have fainted, when I read their names on that register. I did not dream that, whatever they might do, they would ever leave the old home."

"The serpent has crossed our threshold, and poor papa has suffered most terribly for not heeding my advice. I knew that both mother and daughter were bad; and if my step mother had not died, all this would have happened just the same. We would have had one more enemy to contend with."

"My poor father is now little more than a wreck; and, if they have placed him in an asylum, he will soon be really insane. I would give the world to know where he is at this moment, but if I find Herbert, we will both search for him. Herbert, I know, will care for him, and then all will be well."

"But where shall I go next? I cannot remain here, for they will kill me. Had I not observed their names, when looking for Herbert's, I should have been lost; for then I should have registered my real name."

"I dare not leave this room again, until I go back closely veiled, to the coach. And then, I will return up the range. I must go back at once, and stop at Chico City, for I dare not stay here. They are traveling, and spending our money—poor papa's and mine—while he, perhaps, languishes in some asylum, uncared for, where people have been paid to starve, or poison him; and I wander, a waif, on the prairies, and in the mountains!"

"Oh, God! For one true friend—for one trace of Herbert!"

Bursting into tears, Nellie Belzer sunk into a chair, her slender form trembling with the intensity of her deep anguish, her utter despond-

ancy, and the seeming hopelessness of her situation.

Thus she sat, for full five minutes, sobbing as if her heart would break. Then she sprung to her feet, her blue eyes filled with a desperate light, her small hands clinched, and her whole attitude, for the first time, that of a tragedy queen.

Striding tragically across the room, back and forth, with hasty steps but firm, she continued: "I have been a child; I will now be a woman! They shall not conquer—they shall not kill me!

"I will find my father and Herbert. My father shall be free. I will trace him out, alive or dead! If they have killed him they shall suffer for it. They shall linger for long years in prison, or they shall hang—yes, they shall die ignominious deaths!

"They have trampled upon us; they have ground us into earth. They have seared my poor father's brain and caused him to grow old before his time. They have heaped mountains of misery upon my head, and now they have followed me, these two thousand miles, that they may crush out my life!

"They have run me to the wall, but I will now turn upon them. I will scorn them, defy them—ay, kill them! if they crowd me further!

"I, little Nellie Belzer—God help me!—I will—kill—them!"

With these words, the poor girl gazed upward, a tremor convulsed her slender frame, and she sunk senseless upon the floor; her beautiful face, the hue of death, and stamped with an anguish unspeakable.

CHAPTER III.

STRANGELY MET.

Again and again the moon dodged behind a cloud, and still that same ghastly and terrible scene at the head of the gulch met its returning gaze.

The brave and fearless scout, who had taunted his red captors when tied to the torture-stake, when certain death was before him, still lay outstretched upon the blood bespattered sward, his eyes open and glassy, and fixed upon the star-studded heavens, but sightless.

No sign of life was there in that manly, sinewy form.

The old man, too, lay like a corpse—silent and motionless as the red braves around him, who would never again torture defenseless women and babes, never again put the torch to peaceful frontier homes.

Terrible had they looked in life: naturally hideous, more hideous in their war-paint; more terrible now in death!

The horses had quieted, and were now standing still, when the moon rolled out from a cloud upon their prostrate masters. Wondering, and in terror, the animals gazed upon them, the taint of blood in the air causing them at times to snort and snuff toward the scene of the recent fight.

Time passed, and the yelp of coyotes sounded down the gulch; a pack of these cowardly brutes soon appearing around the curve and then retreating, uttering their short, sharp barks in a spiteful and hungry manner, each of them awaiting some one more bold than himself to lead the way up the gulch.

Growling and snapping viciously at each other for a time, they at last dashed in a body toward the head of the gulch, halting, however, before reaching the slain to again go through the same snarling and snapping chorus that they had indulged in at the bend below.

Eventually they flocked in among the prostrate men, one dragging its cold, repulsive nose over the face of the scout, who sprung at once to a sitting posture, in a bewildered state of mind, frightening the coyotes, all of which now sneaked back down the gulch, without a yelp.

With one comprehensive glance around him, the young man was brought back to the realities of the near past, but more by the joyous whinny of his horse than aught else, for his brain had undergone a great strain while a captive and while the hellish dance had gone on around him. Besides this, he had lost much blood, for he had met the three braves alone who had entered the cedars, the old man having been unable so much as to draw his knife.

Observing the latter, who had been the direct means of saving his life, near him, the scout arose to his feet, although not without difficulty, and staggered to his side.

Placing his hand over the old man's heart, he found that there was a feeble pulsation, and he now hastened, as well as he was able, to the place where the Indians had cooked their supper the previous evening, where, as he had expected, he found a gourd of water.

Returning, he bathed the head of the venerable man, pouring some of the liquid down his throat.

Soon he heard a groan: and, in a short time, the aged sufferer opened his eyes and partially raised himself.

"My good old pard," said the scout; "I am glad to see you alive. We had a brisk raffle of it for a little while; but, thank God, we got the best of the red fiends, and saved our hair! How do you feel?"

"Thank you very much for your kindness to an old man, and a stranger," was the slow reply.

"I hardly comprehend what has occurred since I left San Miguel. They counseled me not to leave the town without an escort, but I stole away in the night, for I cannot rest until I find Nellie, my daughter. When I think of her, I am oblivious to anything else; and I must have allowed my horse to go at will, and so the animal took me into this Indian camp."

"That is about the way of it, I reckon," agreed the scout; "and in so doing, you were the means of saving my life, and of ridding the earth of seven fiendish Apaches. The red devils were on the point of scalping me when you turned the curve in the gulch."

"I am truly thankful if, through me, in any way your valuable life has been saved. I now remember that you fought like a tiger, and saved me from being butchered outright. But I feel that I am badly wounded, and must soon die. I would like much, my friend, to leave this fearful spot, and to seek some quiet place where I can confide to you my sad history and tell of my child, of whom I came into these wilds in search."

"I am pained to learn that you are wounded. Let us hope it is not as bad as you think. In the morning I will examine the stab that you have received, as well as my own wounds. But meanwhile we will prepare to quit this place. Lie down again, until I get my clothing and arms. If the Apaches have not rummaged my saddle-bags, I will be all right."

"What may I call your name?" inquired the old man. "And how came you to be in the power of these savages? My name is George Belzer, and I am from the banks of the Hudson in New York State. They call me major, as I served through the Civil War, holding that rank at my discharge. More I will explain later."

"I am called," said the scout, "Rocky Mountain Al; and my range extends from the South Park to the Rio Grande. Las Vegas, New Mexico, is my general hanging-out place, when I take to civilization, which is not long at a time. I was on the trail of these reds from the west side of the divide, but they doubled on me, taking me unawares, when I was nearly dead from want of food and rest. In fact, I was in a cedar thicket asleep, when I was captured; my pard, Broncho Jim, being absent on a bear-hunt when I struck this trail. But, compose yourself, Major Belzer; I think we will slide through this scrape all right. I'll be with you again in a moment."

The scout, who, as he had proclaimed himself, was none other than the noted Rocky Mountain Al—at this time scouting and hunting in New Mexico and Colorado, and also frontier reporter of the "Las Vegas, (N. M.) Daily Gazette"—now proceeded toward his horse. When he reached the animal, the beast pranced about, in evident delight at the reappearance of his master, who patted him fondly.

He then quickly examined his saddle; and, to his joy, found that nothing had been removed from it.

"You wouldn't allow the red hellions to meddle with my property, would you, Prince?" said Al to his horse.

"You kept them at a proper distance, and kicked lively when a greasy Apache came near you. You're worth your weight in gold, old boy; but hanged if, at one time, I ever expected to straddle you again. It's not the first close call we've had though, and slid through without losing a hair. Now, I'll be myself again, as soon as my wounds have been looked to, and I cover my anatomy with fresh togs."

Soon the scout had himself attended to, and then, donning a blue woolen shirt, with a wide flowing collar, reloading his Winchester, and buckling his revolvers and knife about his waist, he stood erect and gazed with a scowl of the most intense hatred upon the dead Apaches. Removing from their belts several fresh scalps, he held them up and looked at them with deep sorrow imprinted upon his features—a sorrow that was mingled with an insane thirst for revenge.

These were the scalps of two white women and five children, the different shades of the flaxen hue of those of the youngest three telling nearly the age of the little one from whom it had been taken.

For a moment he held them up in the moonlight and muttered:

"Torn from the heads of women, who have often made a place by their fireside for me, when cold northerners had blown me in from the prairie; who have cooked from their little store of food for me to eat!

"Torn from little laughing blue-eyed girls, that oft have sat upon my knee and lisped the childish verses I had taught them to sing!

"I swore over their mutilated forms to avenge them, and I have partly kept my oath; though I did come near joining them in the Unknown Land in the attempt. Providence has mercifully preserved my life; and, I believe, to use me as an instrument of retribution.

"Accursed Apaches! I have not yet avenged these innocent children. For every one of their

lives a score of your hideous heads shall lie low in the dust! And there are many more that I must avenge.

"I'm still on the war-path, and I mean business. I, Rocky Mountain Al—my own father, mother, sisters and brothers, all tortured or butchered, leaving me a heritage of vengeance—I'll not forget it until my own head is scalpless!"

With blazing eyes, the scout then drew his knife, and sprung from one to another of the dead Indians, removing their scalps, the ears with them, an insane wildness in his eyes that was terrible to witness.

All this was unheeded by Major Belzer, who lay with closed eyes, like one already dead.

Thrusting the scalps into a buckskin bag, which he cut from one of the saddles of the Apaches, Al secured this to the cantle of his own saddle, collecting also the weapons and other traps of the dead, which he packed upon one of the ponies.

This done, he returned to the side of the old man, saying:

"Major Belzer, I am now ready to conduct you to a place of safety until the morning; then we can go where you can receive the care and attention you stand so much in need of. How are you feeling by this time?"

The old man opened his eyes listlessly, and appeared reluctant to speak or move. In a moment, however, he replied, in a strange and unnatural voice:

"I am very weak, my friend, but I wish to get away from here. I fully expect that Apache war-cries will sound in our ears before we travel far; but if my time has come, well and good. This world has not been over kind to me; and if I but knew that my Nellie was well and happy, I could die in peace. I have much to reveal to you, much to ask of you, but I cannot say it here.

"Assist me to rise, if you please, and to regain my seat in the saddle; then I think I can keep there until we reach some location where we can encamp and have a talk—but I feel that I cannot ride far."

"We will reach good grass and a spring of water, half a mile from the entrance of the gulch," said the scout, confidently. "I am anxious on your account, and when I see you in a safe place I will, I think, hasten to San Miguel for a doctor."

As Al spoke, he assisted the old gentleman to arise, and then noticed that the animal was in a bad condition from want of food and rest.

"You could not have made a long stay in San Miguel, major; your horse is much fagged."

"I have ridden the poor beast from Fort Bent, down the range," was the reply, "and have not given him proper time for rest and grazing. I believe I have been half-insane on my daughter's account."

"Well, never mind that now, but ride out and follow me after I pass you. I shall take the horses of those defunct reds along, and dispose of them in San Miguel, if we ever reach there."

As he spoke, the scout mounted his own black, and spurred down the canyon, leading the seven Indian ponies.

Major Belzer followed, leaving his poor jaded steed to his own guidance, and relapsed into much the same condition and position in which he had been when he rode up the gorge. Uncanny enough he appeared then, but now he was doubly so, seeming more like a corpse than a living, breathing, rational being.

Thus the pair proceeded—one leading, and the other following the Indian ponies. The two, so strangely met—their meeting having been the signal of a tragedy which came near dooming them both to most horrible deaths—yet the one who should, from experience, be most affected and horrified, seemed not to realize the deadly peril he had passed, seemed oblivious to all except his own harrowing, bitter, unspoken thoughts.

On, down the winding, sinuous, rock-bound trail they proceeded, walking their animals as they went—a pair of men, each the very opposite of the other in every way.

CHAPTER IV.

"SUSPICION HAUNTS THE GUILTY MIND."

WHEN poor Nellie Belzer, who had registered at the hotel in Santa Fe as Belle Nelzer, returned to consciousness the sun was high in the heavens.

She had drifted from a state of insensibility into partial consciousness, and then fallen, from sheer fatigue, physical and mental, into a death-like slumber.

As has been shown in her soliloquy, she had not as yet gained any trace of Herb Ives, the one and only friend and lover from whom she could expect aid, sympathy and protection in her hour of peril.

The hot sun now shone through the window upon her upturned pallid face and awakened her sooner probably than she otherwise would have been aroused.

Bathing her eyes, and again arranging her hair, she heard voices in an adjoining room that were familiar.

It was contrary to her nature to eavesdrop;

but, situated as she was, she felt that for her own protection, it was not only pardonable but necessary that she should do so. Walking, therefore, stealthily, to the partition, and observing an aperture, through which, at some time, a stove-pipe had apparently passed, and which was now closed only by some loose papers, she resolved, as she could not otherwise hear distinctly what was said, to quietly remove the obstruction.

She succeeded in doing this, without having caused even a rustle, and felt confident that her movement had been unnoticed. To her joy, she now found that she could hear quite plainly all that was said.

The one now speaking, she recognized as Lucretia Cole.

"I repeat, Carl," said this female plotter. "I repeat that we ought to stay here at least a week longer; for one or the other of them is sure to come to Santa Fe."

"Where was the old man when your spy last heard of him?"

This was the voice of Carl Cole.

"He was on the Arkansas River. The man was no spy of mine, but a border bummer, who recognized the photograph as being that of a man whom he saw on the Arkansas. He said the old man was very feeble, and that he acted strangely. If he had stayed in that asylum a month longer, he would have gone stark mad, and not far to go at that."

Here the woman burst into a loud laugh.

"I wonder, Lucretia, that he was not driven into lunacy long ago, for you tortured him continually."

"Oh, he's in his second childhood; and, since he escaped, and ascertained that his darling Nellie (sarcastically) had gone West to search for her lost lover in the wilderness, without any one to protect her—since then, I fancy, he has worried himself nearly to death. If he would only finish it up in that way it would save us ever so much trouble."

Nellie Belzer was forced to crouch down in the chair, upon which she had been standing, and to cling to the back of the same for support.

Her father then lived! He had, as she had feared, been incarcerated in an asylum for the insane, but had escaped, and was in search of her. Even now he might be but a short distance up the range.

A heartfelt thanksgiving broke in a husky whisper from the poor girl's lips. Again Carl spoke.

"But how about Nellie? Where do you suppose she is?"

"Nell can't be far away," was the answer; "but I am worried in regard to her. If she falls in with the old major, our plans are ruined; unless, indeed, we can bribe some desperadoes to capture them, and that would be an easy matter enough, if we but knew where they are. But one thing is certain. I didn't travel all the way from New York for nothing. I can tell you that much; no, not if I have to shoot them both myself!"

"You can't do that here, Cree. Bordermen are all for fair play. They'd string us up, in that case, mighty sudden. I'm always afraid you'll do something hasty. What sort of a fellow is this Herb Ives? Has he got any 'sand,' as they put it in these parts?"

"He's a quiet, easy going youngster; but I've seen his black eyes snap and blaze before now. He has with him, too, a cousin of Nellie's, who may give us trouble. This young man—George Belzer—was named after the old major, I suppose. A stroke of policy, no doubt; his parents expecting to get a slice of the property. He is from East New York. Ives's family belong in Brooklyn."

"How did you learn all this, Cree? You never said anything about this young man before."

"Because I never thought of him. I have never supposed that we might have any trouble from either of them. The way I came to know that young Belzer was going with Ives, was by abstracting a letter of his from Herb's overcoat-pocket, when he was making a call on Nellie, at Wild Rose Lodge."

"You're a sharp one, Cree; and you'd have made a first class detective. You always keep your eyes open, and it's lucky for us that you do; for all this business is new to me. I'm used to a bolder kind of enterprise. But, did the letter you speak of intimate anything in regard to the direction these young students intended to travel?"

"The proposed route was, to strike for South Park, thence down the range to this city; but the letter did not say which side of the range, east or west."

"Well, if either the old man or the girl strike that party of progressive youths we are dished, Cree—that's a dead sure thing. I'd rather, though, that the girl met Ives than to have the old man come up with him."

"Why so?" demanded the woman.

"Because the major knows that his daughter is out here in search of Ives, and she knows nothing whatever in regard to her father. If Ives meets Nellie, he will be certain to leave her at the town, while he proceeds with his miner-

logical nonsense, and we can then easily run the girl off among some of the bands of desperadoes, where she will no longer trouble us or him."

"Carl, you are getting awfully cute all at once, as the Yankees say. If things could be made to turn out that way, success would be certain. Do you know, I don't believe your assertion that you've never been mixed up with such things before. Your familiarity with the country and the ways of the people, leads me to infer that this is not your first visit to the range."

"You flatter me, Cree," he said, with a laugh. "I am a true cosmopolitan—at home everywhere; but this is the first time that I have been west of St. Louis."

There was an embarrassment in the tone and manner of Carl, that did not escape the keen notice of his wife.

"Beware, Carl Cole!" she said. "If I once detect you in deceiving me, I'll— Well, we'll have no words. It is best not. A mutual policy binds us together; but I will say that I have my suspicions in regard to your veracity in this assertion of yours."

"I believe you have been in Santa Fe before; and, if I find out that you have misrepresented your past life to me, I swear I will have a terrible revenge."

"I have staked everything for you; criminated myself for you; plotted and planned for you, and a tigress could not be more merciless than you will find me, if you are caught playing a part, and are false to me! Bear this in mind, if you please!"

"Cree, you would make as good an actress as detective. The stage lost a star when your mother married old Belzer; for I believe you would have adopted that profession. It is born in you. But, come; you and I must not quarrel."

Whatever might have been the suspicions that lurked in the mind of Lucretia Cole, it was evident that they were either dispelled or else that she smothered them. This her voice testified, as she now said, with vivacity and seeming satisfaction:

"You are right, Carl. We, of all persons, must not quarrel. Go down, my dear, and study well this man whom you propose to 'pump.' Ply him well with liquor, and then bring him to me. I believe I am a better judge of human nature than you are."

"I believe you are, Cree, for you bend all your energies to the business—and for the life of me, I can't, for I have a presentiment that we shall both come to grief. But here goes for the next move in the game."

"Work sly, and be circumspect, Carl. Hold! Look out on the plaza. Isn't that our man? There is a lawless desperation in his very walk, and he is suffering for the stimulants he is not able to purchase."

"You're right, Cree. He's a bummer of the range. I'll corral him sure as shootin'!"

"There you go again with your frontier lingo!"

But Carl Cole did not wait to hear further remarks from his wife. He darted from the room, as Nellie knew by his footsteps and the slamming of the door.

Springing to the window, she glanced out upon the plaza.

A gigantic man, with rough exterior, swollen eyes, and bloated face, was just disappearing beneath her casement into the hotel. She felt sure that this man was the one who had been selected to send in search of her father and herself.

But a few minutes elapsed, during which the young girl could hear Lucretia pacing her apartment with quick, impatient step, when the sound of men coming up the stairs caught Nellie's ears—one of the men, she noticed, walking with a heavy tread.

Again Nellie Belzer mounted the chair, and listened intently, her face pale as death, and her form quivering with suppressed excitement.

The door opened, and she heard Carl's voice.

"Lucretia, here is a gentleman I wish to introduce to you. He is one of our border heroes. This is my wife, sir. I really have forgotten your name."

"I'm ther Terrantaler o' Taos, marm, an' a high-fly cuss, yer kin jist bet. I hes tuck ther contract ter start grave-yards fer all ther burges and camps what's slapped up fer ther nex' twelve moons, from ther Gran-dee ter South Park, an' I thinks o' tendin' my biz clean ter ther Platte."

"I'm a roarer, an' yer kin jist make a memorandum o' bit fer futur' use. This terrest'ial spear air jist a-rollin' on a skyclone whiz through blue space, an' we-uns c'u'd jump off, only we doesn't like ther run o' things, 'thout any sart'inty o' strikin' a better locate, so we makes ther best o' hit."

"But I'm ther loose-gill'd sardine what perposes ter glide over ther dirt an' rocks 'bout whar I'm incarnated, an' grab an' kerral'nough grub ter satisfy my in'ards, 'sides errigatin' whenever liquids air roun' loose. That's ther Terrantaler every time!"

"Gaze at me, marm! I war 'gaged for Barnum's boss beauty, but I levanted 'fore they

kerral'd me under canvas. Whooper-up! Whoop-er-e-e-e-e! I kin choke ther juice out'n ary pilgrim on ther range, in ther flicker of a big-horn's tail! Let me out, marm, on ther Plaza, es thar ain't room hyer ter squeal!"

CHAPTER V.

THE MAJOR'S CONFIDANT.

ALONG, down the winding gulch, went Rocky Mountain Al and Major Belzer; at times riding along a bright, moon-illuminated space, then into the dark shadows, the vast walls of rock reaching far up skyward, but diminishing in height, as they proceeded.

In course of time they reached the mouth of the gulch, and the scout turned in among the foot-hills, going slowly up the range, and occasionally looking back to make sure that the major was following.

To his surprise and concern, he saw that the strange old man was apparently in the same state of mind, as when he rode into the Apache camp; but, as the horse was following close after the Indian ponies, Al did not halt, but kept on as before, winding between the foot-hills, through and across wash-outs, and at times along narrow trails made by wild beasts. With his rifle at half-cock, he kept a keen lookout ahead, for danger might meet them at any step.

Thus on, for nearly a mile from the entrance to that death-pregnant gulch, traveling toward the north, when, turning abruptly in the direction of the range, at the distance of two hundred yards they broke into a small, level plot, inclosed by cedars on all sides except one. This was toward the mountains, where a steep wall of jagged rock shut out all danger from the approach of foes.

Crossing the grass-grown level to the foot of this broken and irregular wall of rock, the scout reached a pool of water, formed by a spring that bubbled from the foot of a massive boulder.

Here he dismounted, removed the equipments from his horse, allowing the animal to go free, and also the Apache ponies, which were too fagged and hungry to stray. By this time Major Belzer's horse reached the spring, and the scout stepped up to the animal, grasped the bridle-rein, and addressed the old man, who still maintained the same listless position.

"Major Belzer," he said, "what is the difficulty with you? We have now reached a quiet spot; secure, I am positive, from interruption. Here we can rest, and allow our animals to do the same; besides that there is cool water in abundance, good grazing, and a most lovely camp. Shall I assist you to alight? Hold on, however! I'll spread some blankets for you to lie on."

The scout did as he had proposed, placing a saddle to serve as a pillow, and making a couch for the old man, who again threw off the feeling that oppressed him, and began to appear more natural. But he made no effort to dismount.

Al was greatly perplexed to account for the strange condition of his friend. He knew that Major Belzer had not been thrown into this state by the wound which he had received from the Apache's knife, for he had acted in the same manner when he unconsciously rode into the camp of the savages.

His singular behavior had attracted the attention of the scout at that time, when the latter was bound to the stake, and condemned to a terrible death from which there seemed no possible escape.

From the few words that the old man had spoken, Al knew that this extreme mental depression must originate from some great trouble—the loss of a daughter, named Nellie, he remembered had been alluded to—but the scout made no comment. Taking the old man from the horse in his arms, he laid him tenderly upon the blankets.

Major Belzer's face became contorted in agony, at being thus moved from the position he had so long maintained in his saddle, and he came near fainting. His features grew more death-like, and blue circles formed around his eyes, which shone like those of a panther, and mirrored the physical pain and mental anguish that ruled the aged man's brain.

Quickly cutting away the clothing around the stab, which he at once distinguished by a long slash in the major's vest, Al saw a gash which bled profusely; but, upon a very slight examination and reflection, he knew there could be no internal hemorrhage. There was, then, no immediate danger.

Had such been the case, the old man could not have ridden thus far. He would have, without doubt, fallen from his horse, before leaving the gulch.

"You are all right, Major Belzer," he said, cheerfully, and feeling much relieved. "The cut is long, but not deep. I have worse gashes on my own arms and breast. It is only a mere scratch, although you have lost a great amount of blood, which in your feeble state of health you could not well spare. I will soon fix you up; and in the morning, I will take you to San Miguel. I know an old Mexican woman there,

who will care for you faithfully until you have regained your strength."

A sigh of intense relief came from the old man's lips. His countenance assumed a more cheerful and hopeful expression as he glanced up gratefully into the face of Rocky Mountain Al.

Still the wounded man did not speak. Al rushed to his saddle-bags. He feared no ill consequences from the wound, except that the loss of blood would greatly weaken the old man. But he was greatly concerned in regard to the strange lights that came and went in his eyes, in the plain marks upon his countenance, which spoke of mental derangement; and he began to fear that there was no hope of his being able to control the actions and movements of his new friend, if the latter should once cross the mental trail, on the borders of which he seemed to linger by mere force of will, born of the anxiety he felt for the daughter whom he said he had lost.

The scout soon dressed the wound, in a manner that would have done credit to an army surgeon; applying some of the ointment and plasters which he always carried with him.

Upon returning these articles to the saddle-bags, Al discovered a flask of brandy, which he had forgotten he had with him, and he rejoiced beyond measure. He detached the cup from the bottom, unscrewed the nozzle, and poured out a gill of the strong liquor, which he diluted at the spring, and then proceeded to administer to the feeble and suffering old man.

The brandy put new life into the major's veins, and his aged face brightened perceptibly, while he looked the thanks his tongue refused to speak.

The scout felt that the old man would soon be better, and probably be able to converse; and not having partaken of food since the previous morning, he quickly ignited a fire, and procuring some coffee and his quart cup from his saddle, he prepared as much of this precious and much-prized prairie beverage as the vessel would hold.

Entering the dense cedars, he next passed through the thicket to the opposite side, where, hurling his knife through the air across a small patch of grass, he killed a cotton tailed rabbit. This he soon dressed and placed before the fire to broil, impaling it upon a stick for this purpose.

When this primitive meal was cooked, Al gave a portion of the delicate flesh of the rabbit to Major Belzer; but the latter could not eat and his friend administered another dose of the brandy, and then devoured the broil and drank the coffee with much satisfaction; in fact he felt hungry enough to devour an ox.

As he finished the rabbit, Al noticed that the old gentleman had arisen to a sitting posture, and that his eyes were more natural in their expression, as he beckoned him to his side.

Igniting his pipe and giving a look at the horses, the scout joined his patient, throwing himself in an easy attitude upon a blanket, and feeling sure that the old man was now about to explain the circumstances that had brought him to the frontier, and that had brought about the sad condition of mind from which he was now suffering. He was not disappointed, for the major at once commenced his story.

"My dear friend" he began, in a feeble but clear voice, "I have been more deeply and favorably impressed by you since we so recently met, under such singular and tragic circumstances, than I have ever before been by any human being.

"Setting aside your daring bravery, your solicitude for a friendless old man in a strange land, and your vocation as a champion and defender of the helpless, there is an honesty and a nobleness of character shown plainly and unmistakably in your countenance, that causes me to wish to open my heart and life to you.

"Every act and motion of yours speaks the true gentleman, and there is an indescribable something which I feel when under your glance that causes me to respect you most sincerely and devotedly, and to put implicit trust in you.

"I have been busy in thought during our ride and I have founded great hopes upon you; not devoid, I admit, of selfishness, but when you know my history you will forgive that and pity me from the depths of your heart for the intense sufferings of years, which I have been called upon to undergo.

"You are sure that there are no more of those terrible savages lurking about, are you? Were all the party that followed you killed?"

Rocky Mountain Al hesitated, but the eyes of his questioner were gazing into his and read him.

"There were ten," said the scout slowly, "but I am positive that the others went up the range as spies, to keep a lookout for any party of whites who might jeopardize their comrades in the gulch. They will, no doubt, return before morning, when a surprise awaits them, which will cause them to make their way over the range in haste, if they fully understand the position of affairs. I do not think they will come in this vicinity; but, if they do, I will give them a warm reception."

Major Belzer shuddered convulsively as he said:

"I was so filled with horror when I found myself among those painted fiends in the gulch that I was at first unable to make any show of self-defense; not, however, on my own account, but from the thought that my darling child might fall into their merciless hands. Have you, my friend, in your travels within the last six months, come up with a party of students who are traveling for the purpose of studying the mineral secrets of New Mexico and Colorado?"

"I have not met the young men you speak of," said the scout; "but I have heard of them."

"Was there a tall, dark young man in this party, calling himself Herbert H. Ives?"

"I am quite positive," said Al, "that such a person was described to me as one of them."

Major Belzer, at this, showed great emotion.

"Where were they, and in which way did they go?" he asked.

"A pard of mine met them on the west side of the mountains, below the South Park, a month ago."

"Thank God!" exclaimed the old man. "There is some hope that they may be now in Fort Garland; and where Herbert Ives is, there is Nellie—"

At this moment, to the surprise of the speaker, Rocky Mountain Al sprung erect, then bounded quickly into the cedars behind where the old man sat, and the next instant reappeared—a burly Apache brave clutched fast in his viselike grip, and both rolling over and over in a desperate and deadly combat, their terrible knives flashing in the silvery moonlight.

CHAPTER VI.

THE HIRED ASSASSIN.

"LET me out, marm, on ther Plaza! Thar ain't room hyer ter squeal!"

"Excuse our friend here, Lucretia," said Carle Cole, laughing. "He is not used to being cooped up in houses, and he feels strange, which is only perfectly natural."

"Thar yer jist hit ther bull's-eye, pard!" burst out the Tarantula of Taos, without giving Lucretia Cole an opportunity to speak. "Thar's whar yer size me right down ter whar I live. Thet's jist 'bout how I pan out, marm. I snatch a few boulders out'n ther side o' a mountain when I keer ter snooze, roll 'em tergether, pickin' out ther soft side ter flop up'ards; then I stretches my 'Pollo-like' natermy fer a 'seester,' es ther Greasers say.

"In ther mornin', when I wakes up, I gi'ns a yawn, an' yer'd think a double-bar'l'd skyclone war jist borned, ef yer war front o' me. Hit gin'rally breaks off 'bout a acre o' scrub pines an' cedars close ter ther ruts, an' blows ther grass up'ards 'nough ter smother ther sun. Then I most allers runs back 'bout a mile from ther range, ter git mermentum. Then I skutes on a wild stampe plum' up ther rocks ter ther peaks, grabbin' a big-horn in each paw. I stan's 'bout five minutes on ther top o' ther range ter take a gaze towards ther Oxerdent arter loose 'Paches, an' sucks in a breath o' pure ox-gin. Then I makes a few flyin' skips down ag'in, hardly touchin' ther rocks in my butes. An' then I'm ready fer ther biz o' ther day, whether hits scoopin' in a herd o' buffer, er clawin' ther scalps off'n a 'Pache war party. Thet's me!

"I'm ther Terrantaler o' Taos! Does yer hear me? I'm a-talkin', an' hit's straight 'Nited States.

"Whoop er up! Whoop-er-e-e-e! Say, pard, can't yer shake up 'nother quart o' double distilled bug-juice, with a squirt or two o' prussic acid inter hit? I hes ter errigate often, er I gits weak in ther j'int. 'Scuse me, marm, fer I'm es full of lingo es a mule's buff air o' cus-sedness an' kick, an' ef I c'u'dn't talk I'd bu'st, sure es shootin'!"

The modest "Tarantula" now drew a heavy sigh of relief, which reached the ears of the eagerly-listening Nellie, whose eyes were filled with wonder at the very peculiar style of the language she had heard.

However, she still listened intently in the hope of hearing something that concerned herself and her father, and her mind was filled with horror as they continued.

"Take a rest, Tarantula," said Carl, laughing heartily, as did also his wife; "take a rest, and listen to me for a moment. I intimated that this lady and myself wished to employ you, and, to prove that we mean business, here is a little 'dust' as a retainer."

Nellie could now hear the click of coins as Carl Cole dropped them into the hand of the "bummer," and she judged that the ruffian was most agreeably surprised, so much so as to render him speechless.

"Do you attend church regularly, Mr. Tarantula?" Nellie next heard Lucretia ask the stranger.

There was an interval of silence, as if the border "hero" was still speechless from surprise. Then the young girl almost fell from her chair in fright at the roar of laughter, which she knew came from the stranger.

It continued for a full minute before he again spoke.

"Marm, I'm doggoned ef yer don't knock me stiff by that question. Why, dang my cats, I never war in a Christian-fact'ry since I war hatched, an' ef I see'd a gospel-slinger I'd stomped quicker'n chain lightnin'. Fact air, I'm afeerd on 'em, an' I sh'u'd think my time hed come fer 'goin' over ther range' ef I should run plum' ag'in' one.

"But I'm a pure, honest infant, fer all that. Hit's coz I hes a 'ligion o' my own that war hatch'd wi' me thet I 'puderates all thet a human kin I'arn me. But I'll sw'ar I didn't 'spect ter run ag'in' sich lib'ral pards, an' I'd like ter know what I kin do fer yer. Thet's jist what I'm longin' fer.

"Ther Terrantaler air a dead open an' shet pard, day or night, ter ther pilgrim er tender-foot what shows that he er she is willing ter pard with me in any kind o' biz, an' 'speshly when they furnishes ther nuggets."

"Have you an extremely loose conscience, and a heart that is not too easily softened?"

This question came in the soft voice of Lucretia.

"My conshuns air Injy rubber, marm—not ther stiff Goodyear patunt, but ther ole-fashion'd plible sort, an' ef yer listen yer kin hear ther ding-dong o' my iron heart. Thet's me, ther Terrantaler o' Taos! Whooper-up! whooper-e-e-e!"

"Spit out yer biz, folkses, an' I'm ther man fer yer money, ter cut throats, rob a church, er cave in a mine-shaft! Jist make a memorander o' hit."

"Remember," said Lucretia, "that if you don't agree to do our bidding, you are to keep silent now and ever as to what has passed between us."

"Bet yer last lingerin' pasc I'll keep num; but thar ain't no need ter take no affidavit on thet, fer I'm goin' ter dip inter this biz es deep es yerselves. I've sed hit, an' I hain't ther pilgrim ter crawfish. Gaze et me sharp! I'm ther Terrantaler o' Taos. Yer don't know me yit, by a jug full."

"Do you think you would recognize the originals of some photographs, if I show them to you? Can you retain the features of the pictures on your mind?"

"Reckon I c'u'd, marm, though I'm not used ter seein' sich sort o' trash. I come nigh bustin' up Barnum when I levanted, fer he hed me pictur'd out, big es life, on ther show-bills, es ther 'Beauty o' Buffler Bluffs.'"

"I think we can trust him with our secrets, Carl; don't you, dear?" asked the fair Lucretia.

"Oh, yes; he's true blue, and I'll gamble on it," said Carl.

"Gi'n us yer paw, pard! I'm mighty glad yer hes weighed me, an' foun' me solid. Go ahead, marm. I'm ready fer biz; an' ef yer doesn't sling hit out, I'll skute down arter a drink, while yer ruminatin' over hit."

Nellie heard Lucretia cross the room and open a trunk. She then came near to the partition, saying:

"There, Mr. Tarantula, is the photograph of an old man, who is now, probably, between this city and Spanish Peaks. And here is an excellent picture of a young lady—the daughter of the old man, and of whom he is in search.

"Now we do not want them to meet; in fact, they must not meet. You must not only prevent it, but if by any of the common dangers of the border the old man should get killed, you will receive one thousand dollars.

"Again, if you can arrange it so that the young lady may be captured by some band of desperadoes, who will hold her until she will no longer have a desire to visit the States, you will receive a like amount.

"Do you understand what we mean? I have spoken plainly."

"The fact is, Tarantula," put in Carl, "we want the two to be the victims of some accident. The world is not large enough for them and us; you understand?"

"I undercumstumble ter yer leetle game, an' I takes a hand," was the accommodating reply.

"Ef ther ole man an' ther gal air in New Mex'er Col'rado, I'll kerral 'em dead sure an' sartin. I'll cut ther ole man's wizen, an' shut ther gal up in ther rocks somewhar, feedin' her on pine cones until she wilts inter her shoes an' glides off ter t'other world easy-like; fer I sw'ar, bad es I is, I c'u'dn't scratch ther skin o' a caliker-kivered human, or plug a ball inter her, nother. Ther trail air open, an' I air on ther war-path. I'll jump my critter ter-night, arter dark, an' levant up ther range. But whar in thunderation kin I see you-'uns ag'in'?"

"Is there any town between this and Rayton Pass that is off the regular stage road?" asked Carl Cole.

"Wa-al, yer kin jist bet! An' hit's thar I'm goin' ter strike out fer—Chico City air ten mile from the reg'lar trail, plum' et ther foot o' ther range.

"Thar's a station on ther Cannadian Creek, whar yer git off, and climb another hearse fer Chico. Hit ain't bin slapped up long; an' I never runs in thar but I hears thar is high-fly times, an' plenty o' dust, an' two mills a-smashin' quartz.

"Ther Pumas, a band o' road-agents, hes a notion o' levantin' up thet-a-way, I hears. They

been't but jist sot up biz. They is comin' from Gran-dee way.

"I'm o' ther opine that our game, one er t'other, hes run in thar et Chico, er yer'd 'a' see'd 'em, er 'a' heard o' 'em, comin' down country."

"Your opinion is a reasonable one, and we will run in at Chico City in a short time. Be on the lookout for us, and have good news. Keep sober, and don't let either the girl or the old man slip you."

"Bet yer scalp I won't, pard! But I'm gittin' cottony 'bout ther gills, an' my throat air full o' cobwebs. I'll peep in on yer afore I skates ter-night, ef I doesn't git b'ilin' over wi' p'ison."

"Howsomever, ef I does, I kin 'tend ter biz. I'll member ther faces o' them pictur's, dead sure."

"Air ther gal a modest-like piece o' caliker, what 'ud hang out et a hotel like a first-class XXX lady?"

"Yes," answered Lucretia; "and she has plenty of money. She is very quiet and retiring in disposition."

"I'll gi'n her a show ter retire inter ther solitudes o' ther Rockies," said the Tarantula, with a boasting air. "But, 'bout ther ole man, air he a high-fly coon?"

"He was a major in the army," said Lucretia. "Major Belzer is his name; and the girl's is Nellie Belzer. Do you think you can remember that?"

"I reckon I hes hit kinder wedged inter my brain box; but, pards, I'm levantin' fer liquids. So long. Whoop-er up! Whoop-er-e-e-e!"

The door slammed, amid the farewells uttered by Carl and Lucretia; and the heavy steps down the stairs, that caused the frail building to tremble, proved that the "Tarrantaler o' Taos" had gone down to "errigate."

Poor Nellie sunk down into the chair, exhausted with the fearful strain upon her nerves, and remained for some time in that attitude, in deep thought.

She had the advantage of knowing that she could recognize the voice of the man who had been hired to kill her father and abduct herself; and she hoped to get a clearer view of him from her window than she had previously obtained.

She waited, however, until the ruffian had, as she calculated, had sufficient time to satisfy his thirst at the bar. Then she went to the win low and stood for a time gazing out upon the plaza.

Soon a burly, gigantic borderer, in blue shirt, buckskin breeches, and slouched sombrero, walked out from the hotel into the square; and, from the slight glimpse that she had obtained previously, when this same man had entered with Carl Cole, Nellie knew him to be the one whom she had heard conversing with the hopeful pair in the adjoining room, and whom she had henceforth to consider her most deadly enemy.

If she had entertained any doubt as to his identity, it was soon removed; for the giant tore off his sombrero when he reached the middle of the plaza, and swaying the same over his head, yelled as before:

"Whoop-er up! Whoop-er-e-e-e!"

Determined that she would reach Chico City in advance of this desperado and assassin, and save her father, should she be so fortunate as to meet him, Nellie resolved to take the next stage, and evade being observed by Carl and Lucretia in doing so by going on foot out of the town.

With this view, when the evening came, she obtained an interview with Jim Harding, the stage driver, and arranged to be taken up by him, and to have her baggage put on the stage.

When night came, Nellie Belzer was being whirled, as fast as brave Jim Harding could urge his trusty team, toward Chico City, she being the only passenger.

CHAPTER VII.

"GREEK MEETS GREEK."

MAJOR BELZER had been placed within a little open space on the edge of the cedars, where the branches on either side of his covert shut out the view in the direction of the mountain, and toward the wash-out, by which he and his companion had approached it.

Within that view, Rocky Mountain Al and the Indian were struggling for the mastery; the bright moonlight revealing their passion-contorted features, as over and over they rolled, each grasping with his left hand the wrist of his opponent's right, with a grip of desperation.

The Apache was a remarkably large and strongly developed warrior; and his adversary, who was now weakened by privations on the trail, and by loss of blood, was not in a condition for a hand-to-hand fight.

The bright-bladed bowie and long scalping-knife gleamed and glinted in the moonlight, as the two men, with superhuman efforts, strove each to get the upper side, and to maintain the same.

First one and then the other gained a position astride his foe, but he could do no more than gaze into his eyes with vengeful hatred, for his knife was controlled by the firm grasp of his opponent.

To describe the feelings of Major Belzer at this crisis would be impossible. He suffered the

greatest anguish and apprehension in regard to the safety of his new friend; and he strove to gain an erect position, but the intense strain upon his weak brain, caused by the scenes through which he had lately passed, and the almost positive conviction that his wound was mortal, had shocked his nervous system to such an extent that he had become almost powerless.

It was nearly an impossibility to catch a sure aim at the Indian with his revolver, even were he in good health and of strong nerves, and the major did not dare to make the attempt; but, as he saw that the strength of the scout was fast ebbing, and that the red son of the mountains was almost certain of victory in the end—in which event he would also be butchered like a dog—as he saw this, the old man, by a mighty effort of will, threw off the oppressive feelings that ruled him, and proceeded to crawl upon hands and knees out into the opening, his bowie held ready for instant use.

Trembling in every limb, the enfeebled man crept forward, the strength in his arms giving out at times and causing him to fall prostrate; but, with determined mien, he would slowly regain his former position, his eyes fixed upon the desperate struggle.

Life and death now depended upon his weak and trembling exertions, life and death for him and for Rocky Mountain Al—perhaps, also, for his lost Nellie!

As this last thought came into his mind, he became nerved to greater strength, but not, however, sufficient to battle with even a coyote.

The combatants still struggled. The glaring eyes of each blazed fury into the orbs of the other, both panting with their terrible efforts for the mastery; the paint-daubed face of the Apache close to the pale features of the wounded and almost exhausted scout, the sickening breath of the Indian fanning Al's brow—the fiery breath of a murderous fiend!

Neither of them was aware of the presence of the old man, the Indian being totally ignorant of the proximity of any other white man, as his manner proved, for he had not allowed his gaze to wander from his opponent to scan the "open," as he most assuredly would have done had he imagined that his foe had a friend, or friends, at hand.

Major Belzer, after all, was not so weak in mind as in body, and he planned as he crawled.

He reasoned that nothing would be gained by revealing himself in front of the two men.

He could not hope to accomplish anything by such a course, for the Indian would undoubtedly keep the scout rolling and struggling in order to prevent him from making a successful stab with his bowie.

The only way in which he could assist his friend was to surprise and startle the Apache to such an extent that his grip on Al's wrist would relax sufficiently to allow the latter to wrench his knife-hand free.

The probability of success in this way filled Major Belzer with relief, and he became imbued with new strength at the thought. Crawling with more vigor and speed, he soon reached the rear of the panting pair, where he could, by reaching over, grasp the feather decked hair of the Apache, whose moccasined feet were at his hand.

There was no time for thought, or to choose a position. The Indian was now bracing himself for a final and powerful struggle with his white foe; and the major felt, by the labored panting of the scout, that it would soon be at an end.

Gaining, with an effort, an upright position, the old man threw himself forward, directly upon the back of the brave; clutching his bowie with both hands, and directing the points of the blade to strike the Indian in the back of the neck, depending upon his weight to force the knife downward.

The Apache was holding at this moment, the arms of the scout outstretched upon the sword, his hideous face bending over him—Al feeling that he had escaped death in the gulch only to meet it now in the "open," for he knew that he could no longer hold out against his powerful and sinewy opponent.

A whispered prayer was on his lips—a prayer that he had lisped in childhood at his mother's knee—his thoughts flying backward to that time, taking in his whole life one flitting instant; while he closed his eyes to shut out the horribly repulsive face that bent exultantly over him.

At that moment came a shock. He felt the form of the Indian forced upon him. He felt the hideous face pressed hard against his own; and, thinking that the brave was making a desperate effort to master him, which he knew he could not resist, a faintness came over him, his muscles relaxed, and he floated unresistingly into oblivion.

Had he retained his senses, the scout would have beheld a strange scene, a scene that would have filled him with gratitude and wonder, for the Apache lay quivering in the agonies of death by his side; the blade of Major Belzer's bowie being tightly imbedded between the bones of his neck, the spinal cord having thus been severed!

Alongside the twitching and repulsive form of the savage lay the old man also senseless; his

grand effort to save his friend having been too much for him, and his senses having left him before he knew whether he had been successful in placing the Indian *hors du combat* or not.

Again were the two men, so strangely met, lying senseless upon the sward; the face of the old man having upon it an agonized, mind-tortured expression, and that of the scout one of hopeless horror.

The iron nature of the latter had at last been forced to bend, through weakness and long-continued suffering.

At the beginning of the fight the horses, with the exception of the black steed of Rocky Mountain Al, and the animal belonging to the major, had galloped from the "open" in fright. These two stood on the border of the cedars, snorting and prancing about during the terrible struggle. The black horse, as soon as the men lay silent, walked slowly up to his master, rubbing his nose over the prostrate form, as though begging his friend and protector to arise and speak to him.

Just then, high up on the jagged rocks, springing out from the cedars, appeared another Apache brave, even more hideous in appearance, more devilish.

Not at first, did he seem to comprehend the true position of affairs below; but as he stood, for a time, peering downward, his snake-like eyes glaring with anticipations of booty and trophies of his prowess, he caught sight of his brother brave, lying silent and motionless beside the men whom he supposed to be asleep.

It needed only an instant's reasoning to tell him that his fellow warrior was dead—that he had fallen, fighting the white foe—killed, perhaps, ere he had sung his death-song. This decision arrived at the Apache sprung back into the cedars, and then on by a winding way, from rock to rock, now and then lowering himself from the branches he clung to.

The base of the range was soon reached, and then drawing his long gleaming scalping knife, the warrior stealthily entered the cedars, near the rocky wall at the base of the mountain.

He passes through the belt of evergreens, and from the edge of the same peers upon the scene that he has viewed from the height above.

He has made but slight motion, but it has been enough to draw the attention of the noble black steed of Rocky Mountain Al. The animal jerked up its head, and gazed suspiciously toward the point from whence the Apache peered out.

The latter was still looking down upon the wild scene. Dead they must be, he reasoned; but the horse puzzled him. He felt a chill, as the eyes of the beast looked, human-like, toward him.

All is silent—silent as death! And death, indeed, seems to rule that cedar and rock-bound vale.

Suddenly the Indian straightens himself, and begins to stride rapidly into the moonlit "open."

There was naught but a horse to bar his way; but even that animal may put his life in peril.

If the whites but sleep, the steed may, if startled, awaken them; hence he must proceed with caution.

Every step, every movement of the Apache, is watched closely and suspiciously by the horse; a slight tremor, perceptible about the muscles of the shoulders, neck, and nostrils, as he stood and gazed.

But the warrior has now forgotten the animal. His eyes are fastened upon the form of the prostrate scout.

He sees the gentle rise and fall of the breast, and he knows that the senseless white man will soon recover.

What he does, he must do quickly!

One quick glance shows him the bowie knife, it projects from the neck of his fellow warrior; and his painted face contorts with a thirst for revenge.

The two whites had evidently been vorsted by one Apache.

His brother brave has wounded both before he had himself been struck to the earth. To satisfy himself, the Apache placed his hand on the breast of his pard.

It was cold. He then crept forward toward the scout, on hands and knees, and with his long scalping-knife between his teeth, the Indian made ready for his dastard deed. Two feet only intervened between him and his intended victim, when the latter threw up his arm wearily, as if awakened—as if aroused by the near approach of danger; as if recalled from oblivion by his guardian angel, but too late to realize his position, and to act.

A fiendish and exultant expression marks the hideous, paint-daubed face of the Apache brave.

One bound now, and he will be astride his white foe, who will be helpless beneath his knife.

The Indian gathers up his strength to make that bound, his whole attention bent upon the form of the scout, who seems about to arise.

At this moment, the black steed of Rocky Mountain Al, with a snort of madness and fury, sprung into the air its fore-feet for an instant, flying like those of a buck fighting a snake.

then, downward they came, crushing the Apache brave to the earth, its hoofs crushing the warrior's bones like pipe-stems!

One wild, piercing, far sounding death-yell, echoing up from the mountain-side, from cleft to cleft, and then all is over.

The black steed, with blazing eyes, stands over the dead and terribly mangled Apache brave.

The scout rises quickly to a sitting posture, and at the same instant Major Belzer also gains the same position, trembling and nervous, and not for some time recalling the near past.

He sees before him now two dead Indians, one crushed almost beyond the semblance of humanity; and he knows that, once more, he and the scout have been providentially saved from a horrible death.

The two men sat gazing at each other, a prayer of thanks upon the lips of each. They soon comprehended the fearful scene before them. The bowie projecting from the neck of one brave revealed to the scout to whom he owed his life when struggling against such terrible odds with the savage.

Rocky Mountain Al patted the nose of his horse, and the noble beast rubbed its head against its master's shoulder, while both men thanked God for the miraculous preservation of their lives.

At this moment the black horse snorted again tossed its head, and gazed up at the cliff. This caused the scout and the major to look upward also, apprehensive of the approach of more danger.

There, upon a rocky ledge, they saw another Apache brave, who stooped and gazed downward for an instant, and then with a blood-curdling howl, bounded back among the cedars, and disappeared.

"Major," said Al, "there goes the last of the ten, the sole survivor of the Apache war-party that I have followed for many days. He will not trouble us, you may be sure, so there is a prospect of rest for both of us."

"But, my friend," he continued, "I am well aware that I owe you my life. There—not a word! But, remember, Rocky Mountain Al pays his debts."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE EXPLANATION.

"AND now, major, if you please, I would like to have you explain how, in the name of the seven wonders, you, in your weak state, succeeded in separating the vertebrae of that Apache, just in time to save me from being dissected by the cowardly cuss?"

Rocky Mountain Al asked this question, still seated on the sward, from which he had partially arisen upon coming back to consciousness. Major Belzer also maintained the same position, neither of them caring to attempt standing or walking until they had fully recovered from the excitement caused by their last terrible exertions—most terrible, when their weak state was taken into consideration.

The old man related the manner of his approach, and how he had sprung from the rear upon the Indian; explaining that he had lost all consciousness as soon as he had hurled himself upward and forward.

"Major, as I have said before, I owe you my life—a life for this, and another for your timely arrival at the gulch, when, but for your coming, I should have been put to death by the most horrible torture."

"I am a man who never forgets a friend, or a favor; and, in the future, you can command my services always to the death."

"My friend," returned the old man, "you over-rate the little that I have done. I must admit that, judging from the circumstances, your life was saved at the gulch by my accidental arrival, which was due entirely to my horse. It was the last place on earth that I should have entered, had I been myself, and been guiding my animal. Hence you owe your life to him on that occasion; and, on this, we are both indebted for our preservation to your own noble black. The events of the night have been most strange indeed, and we have been most miraculously preserved. On that account I feel somewhat encouraged to hope for a consummation of my heartfelt wishes—to hope for success, where, for some time, I have felt no hope."

"But do you think we are safe in this exposed position? I confess that I have my fears in regard to the Indian who appeared just now on the rocks."

"He will not trouble us, as I said before," asserted the scout. "He is now flying down the range, as though the fiends were in chase of him."

"He doubtless knew, or if not he will soon ascertain, that his brother butchers have been slain in the gulch; and by that time he will be filled with superstitious terror at finding himself the last of his party—at knowing that all except himself have been 'wiped out' by two white braves."

"For all that if he ever gets back to his village, he will swear that they were attacked by a hundred, and he alone escaped. However, I grant you, I am of the opinion that we had bet-

ter seek some quiet nook in the rocks, at some distance from this point, and there roll ourselves in our blankets, and get the sleep we so much need."

"Wait a moment, until I recover myself, and then I'll give you another dose of brandy, and take one myself. We need bracing up now, if we ever did. Let us defer our mutual explanations further until morning; although I confess to feeling great interest and a curiosity to know why a gentleman like yourself should be roaming these wilds alone."

"From your words, I have surmised that you are in search of a lost daughter."

"Your supposition is a correct one," said the major. "But it is a long story, and, as you have just said, had better be deferred until the morrow."

"However, I will state that I have placed great hopes upon your assisting me in my search; and if you will assure me that you can and will do so, I shall feel much easier in my mind, and shall rest better."

"Major Belzer, I am at your service, as I have told you, to the death. If your daughter is in Colorado, New Mexico, or Arizona, I am the man to find her; and I will do it, I promise you."

"We are henceforth pards—prairie pards—and, when Rocky Mountain Al pards with a man, he is going the whole length of the lariat to serve him."

"Thanks, Al! Ten thousand thanks for such encouraging words; as well as for all your kindness to a broken-hearted old man."

"Enough of that, major! But I find I must dress my wounds again. That Apache twisted me up bad, and they have burst open, and are bleeding afresh. It is nothing, however. I will patch myself up again, and then attend to you. After that, I think, we can rest in peace."

Half an hour after, Major Belzer and Rocky Mountain Al were wrapped in death-like slumber, in a small cavern in the mountain-side, some three hundred yards or more from the "open;" the old man having been assisted to reach the spot, by the scout, though it was little more than the blind leading the blind.

The sun was high in the heavens when they awoke, both being greatly refreshed and strengthened by their sleep; then, after each had swallowed a dose of brandy—Al's forethought having led him to take the flask to the cave—they again descended the rocks, and regained the "open," where they received a hearty welcome from the scout's horse.

After attending to the wound of the major as well as to his own stabs, Al proceeded to get breakfast; having still some coffee and dried buffalo-meat in his saddle-bags.

This, with some hard biscuits, made a good meal for men with appetites born of mountain air, and the violent exercise that had been forced upon them the previous night.

Major Belzer appeared like another man, so encouraged was he by the scout's avowed intention to find his daughter, if he had to search the range from the Rio Grande to the Canada line.

In fact the old man was greatly impressed with Al, and looked upon him as something almost superhuman; the scout being one who quickly recovered bodily strength and high spirits, repudiating pain and fatigue until nature could stand no more, before giving up, as has been demonstrated.

Their breakfast being finished Al lighted his pipe, saying:

"I reckon I'll have my smoke out this time. That sneaking Apache broke it up last night; and it was lucky that I heard a branch switch, as we sat on the blankets, or he would have discovered us, got his pard and cleaned us out, taking us by surprise, in the midst of your story."

"Now, you have a good opportunity, major, to go on with your explanation, if you feel so inclined, and are equal to it. Only be brief; for we must get out of this and strike for San Miguel, where I will leave you in good hands, and go at once in search of your daughter."

"I was just about to ask you," was the reply, "if you felt like listening to my story. So I will proceed at once, making it, as you suggest, as brief as possible. As I have told you, I am from the Hudson, in New York State, where my family residence is at present; the same being a fine mansion, with beautiful grounds, on the Palisades, overlooking the noble river."

"My first wife died ten years ago. We had one child, a daughter named Nellie; a beautiful girl, who is, I hope, at the present time, alive, well, and happy, though I fear otherwise."

"Three years ago I married again, much against the wishes of Nellie; and would that I had listened to my child, when she begged me not to bring a stranger into our beautiful home. The lady whom I married had a daughter by a former husband. She is of nearly the same age as my Nellie, but as unlike her as a snake is unlike a dove."

"The two never agreed. Lucretia Lane—that is, my step-daughter—is an overbearing, jealous, and vindictive young woman; unscrupulous, suspicious and vengeful. Besides this

she is a great plotter. She made our home a hell. I cannot employ a mild term in the case."

"Especially was this so after her mother's death, one year ago. She then took the reins into her own hands, and ruled despotically. For myself, I was in too ill health to oppose her."

"She has had a lover, who is her counterpart in disposition—a young man of the name of Carl Cole. He haunted our home continually, the two putting their heads together to drive my daughter away, and then to confine me in a retreat for the insane."

"There is a very estimable young man, to whom my child is engaged to be married. Three months ago he came West, to visit the mining districts, for the purpose of research, and the study of practical mineralogy."

"I know that he called to bid Nellie good-by; but he did not enter the house, as he had often been treated rudely by Lucretia Lane."

"I know, also that he and my daughter were to have corresponded, but I firmly believe that Lucretia intercepted his letters to Nellie."

"The poor girl grew very disconsolate, and one day she told me that she had overheard Carl Cole and Lucretia making plans to dispose of both of us. I laughed at her fears, but I soon found out that she knew more of the two schemers than I did, for a drug was administered to me, and I think that, under its influence, I signed some papers—perhaps conveyed my property, at my death, to Lucretia, leaving Nellie penniless!"

"Be this as it may, I was next placed in an insane asylum; but, after some months, I escaped, and in disguise visited my home, to find my house filled with guests of Carl and Lucretia, who were spending my money lavishly. From an old servant, whom I swore to secrecy, I learned that Nellie had, through the persecution of the female fiend whom I had been the means of bringing into our home, been obliged to fly, no one knew whither. With the help of the old servant I robbed my own house, having a secret safe in the wall of the basement. This was lucky for me now."

"Securing funds, I went to New York, saw my attorney and bankers, explained the situation, and in this way put a stop to the getting of any more funds by Carl Cole and Lucretia. Ascertaining from relatives of Nellie's lover that he had not been heard from for some time, and also that my daughter had called upon them for his address, which at that time was Denver, Colorado, I decided that, not knowing what had become of me, the poor child had started for West to meet her lover, according to an agreement between them previous to his departure."

"Since then I have searched from Denver to San Miguel, along every station of the stage-line, but without getting any information except that Nellie did arrive in Denver, and started thence down the range with the avowed intention of going to Santa Fe. This is all I know in regard to her."

"Now comes another trouble. Lucretia and Carl had a grand wedding at my house on the Hudson; but their pleasure was spoiled when they learned that I had escaped from the insane asylum, and that I had been in the city, established my sanity, and put a stop to the drawing of any more funds at my banker's."

"This, it seems, so infuriated them that they also started for the West, knowing that Nellie would naturally seek her lover when she left home, and that I, when I escaped them, would also come West in search of my daughter."

"Now, my friend, when I inform you that Cole and his wife are in Santa Fe, and probably with sufficient funds to hire desperate characters to do their work—and to find us they are, of course, determined—you will understand my terrible condition of mind, my dread, anxiety, and my great desire to find Nellie before they do."

"They mean to have my fortune, even though to get it they must shed blood. Of this I am satisfied."

"Why did you not have them arrested when you escaped from the asylum?" asked Al.

"For the reason that I was very unwell, and I shrunk from publicity. I had no idea then that they would criminate themselves. And I do not wish, even now, that the public should know any more of my family troubles. I have not, indeed, been in a fit condition of mind to understand how to act in the premises, and I have had no friend to counsel me. Thus far, I have conducted my search alone; but now, I trust that I have found a man who will be the means, under Providence, of returning a child to the arms of her father."

"Major Belzer," said the scout, "you are not mistaken. I'll find your Nellie. She is on the range, or near it; and I will foil these infernal plotters. I'll do it, so help me Heaven!"

CHAPTER IX.

A BLESSING IN DISGUISE.

NELLIE BELZER had not explained any of the circumstances that caused her to leave Santa Fe secretly, either to the stage-driver or the night-clerk of the Grand Central Hotel.

She held a conference with both at the same time, and merely confided in them to the extent that she was traveling in search of her

father, who had left Denver in a partially demented state, and that she had come to Santa Fe in hopes of gaining some information in regard to him.

A photograph of Major Belzer she gave to each, requesting to write her at Chico City, if they, either of them, should learn anything of the whereabouts of her parent.

Both men thought it strange that she should desire to leave in such a manner; but they refrained from questioning her—Jim swearing that he would "keep both eyes peeled for the major, and also that he would protect Nellie herself, while she was on the line." He advised her, also, not to make a long stay at Chico City, as there were plenty of "bad citizens" in that burg, and "range bummers" were as thick as ticks on a chaparral mule's neck.

Nellie requested the clerk to erase her name, if possible, from the register; for notwithstanding her attempts at a disguise, she feared that it might excite suspicions. She wished him also to say, in answer to any inquiries, in regard to her, except such as might come from the original of the photograph, that she had gone down country.

This he readily agreed to; indeed he would have done almost anything to serve the beautiful sad-eyed girl.

Thus were matters, when Nellie Belzer left Santa Fe; the clerk, after she had stolen out the back way of the hotel, following her with a basket of lunch, while Jim Harding advised her to wait the arrival of the "hearse."

Here, the clerk remained with her, until Jim drove up; no one in Santa Fe being aware of the departure of Nellie, or the halting of the coach.

Assisting the maiden into the stage, the clerk bade her good-by; and Jim, requesting her to make herself at home, cracked his whip, and the six prancing horses, fresh from the stables, sped away up the trail, north, at a wild gallop. Nellie reclined upon the back seat, and felt fresh relief, as every mile was sped over, separating her from her merciless persecutors.

On went the coach; the cheery whistle of the driver, the tramp of hoofs, and the creaking of the swaying vehicle, all blending in a strange, weird way, as they almost flew over the moonlit plain, causing the young girl, as time passed, to sink into a peaceful slumber, which lasted until the station was reached where a change of horses was made—a lone log stable, some thirty miles from Santa Fe.

Here, Jim Harding looked in, and with a kindly voice of sympathy, inquired as to "how she stood the run," thus far.

"Thank you, Mr. Harding; I am doing nicely," was the reply, "and have enjoyed a most refreshing sleep."

This answer delighted Jim, who remarked:

"I'm mighty glad thar warn't no passengers in' north this trip. You've got ther coach all to yerself, as nice as a pin; an' I'll whirl you through without so much as rumplin' yer hair, Miss Nelzer."

"I shall never forget your kindness, Mr. Harding. But my real name is Belzer, and not Nelzer."

"All right! I often git names wrong," said Jim, as he sprung to his seat, buckled the apron, and gave his fresh nags the "go" yell.

Thirty miles further on, and San Miguel was reached, where the horses were again changed; and, much to Jim's disappointment, two passengers were booked for Trinidad. However, to his relief, as well as to Nellie's, they climbed up to the top of the coach, with cigars in their mouths, and several drinks inside; which latter, probably, caused them to choose a seat on the outside, where they could enjoy the fresh air.

The next stage extended to Fort Union, some forty miles distant, where another driver was to take the coach; but, much to the surprise of the latter, Jim volunteered to "change off," thus taking the stage to Trinidad, and then back to Fort Union on the next, when this man could make Jim's drive to Santa Fe.

This change just suited "Bud," the Fort Union driver, and all went well; Jim Harding, in his corner for Nellie, imposing upon himself a long and tedious drive, when he ought to have been asleep.

Once more, the old "hearse" rolled on, the "outsides" at times "bracing" Jim up from their flask of Old Otard, and pressing fresh cigars upon him as often.

On they went, Nellie again sleeping soundly, until, as the gray streaks of morning shot up in the eastward, and the stage, after again changing horses, passed a small creek that emptied into another at some distance north, where the passengers who were bound for Chico City alighted.

This creek was bordered with timber, and a steep bank led down into it, the water being shallow, and easily forded without wetting the wheel hubs.

Jim Harding was not accustomed to this part of the line, he having driven over the road to Trinidad but a few times; and he pulled up his team as soon as he entered the timber, walking the horses toward the steep bank that led down into the little stream.

Half the distance between the edge of the

timber and the creek was passed, when a most astounding incident occurred.

The trail was but little wider than the coach, the wheels at times rubbing against the dense undergrowth, and Jim was intent upon guiding his team.

The bottom timber was silent as death, only the creaking of the coach and the dull tramp of the horses on the soft damp earth being audible.

Suddenly, from the dark shades, in a clear, commanding voice, rung the words:

"Break brush, boys, and attend to biz!"

The next instant there was a crashing of the bushes, and half a dozen masked men, mounted upon snorting steeds, sprung toward the coach on both sides with leveled and cocked revolvers in their hands.

"Pull in, Jim Harding, and keep both hands on the ribbons, or you're a dead man! Outsides, throw up your paws and hold them there, or we'll make the daylight shine through you!"

These commands were delivered in a rapid and imperative manner, that had the ring of business, by a powerfully-built man, evidently the chief of the road-agents, and Jim Harding was for an instant dumfounded; but more by the fact that he was known to the robber captain, here on a route that was not his own, than by aught else.

But Jim was not the man to give up without a struggle, especially when he had such precious freight inside; and hardly had the order to pull up left the lips of the chief when, lightning-like, Jim's long whip-lash cut the hams of the leaders, and by a dexterous movement of arm and wrist, struck the off-horse, and then wound around the belly of the near wheeler.

As Jim executed this scientific sleight-of-hand, he yelled:

"Outsides! down flat on the coach—down for your lives!"

At the same time he sunk under the seat, entirely concealed from view by the sole-leather apron, over which he held the reins as the team plunged madly down the steep bank to the ford, and a volley of bullets cut the air hitting the coach.

A loud, derisive peal of laughter struck Jim's ears as the team thundered down the incline, and a dread fear shot through his brain for the first time.

He sprung up from under the seat, and made an effort to kick the brake and jerk up the team—but too late.

The leaders struck a rope that was stretched across the trail, and went down. The others followed, all in a heap; the pole darting into the kicking steeds, the coach, from the great momentum, being thrown bottom upward upon the animals, and the pole snapping off at the axle-tree.

For a moment the coach swayed upon the struggling horses, and then rolled over into the creek, a piercing shriek from poor Nellie, followed by cries of terror and pain from the "outsides" ringing on the night air.

Jim Harding was forced to take a whirling "Niagara leap" over his prostrate team, landing in the water; but he was up in an instant, pale and frightened beyond belief.

Wading to the upturned coach, now lying on its side, Jim jerked open the door, unmindful of the masked band, who now trotted down leisurely over the bank, knowing that the stage and passengers were at their mercy.

"Miss Belzer," cried out Jim, anxiously, "are you hurt?"

There was no answer.

Darting through the door, he appeared the next moment with the senseless form of Nellie in his arms.

Down and out from the wreck he climbed, and then waded through the water to the ford, while three of the bandits urged their horses to the coach and secured the mail-bags, and express-safe from the box under the driver's seat.

The "outsides" stood on the bank, wet and bruised, guarded by a bandit with presented revolver, while another "went through" them in a business-like manner.

Jim leaned upon one knee at the edge of the creek, and dashed water in the face of the poor girl, who was pallid as a corpse. As he was thus endeavoring to resuscitate her the bandit chief rode up saying:

"How much 'dust' is there in the safe, Jim? But, say, who have you got there? A pretty girl, she is, I swear! Well, by all the gods! What in the name of wonder does it mean? If that ain't Nugget Nell, I'm the boss liar of New Mexico! What, in the mischief, is she masquerading in that rig for? She's a high-flyer, and as cute as a Yankee school-marm!"

"As to the safe," said Jim, in a voice of defiance and fury, "you can weigh the dust yourself, if you can get it open. You got the dead-wood on me by a sneaking, mean, dirty trick, and I'd give a month's pay to know who the devil you are, that can call my name, when I'm off my regular section."

"As to this young lady—you never saw her before, I'm gambling on that; an' she never saw you. I don't know Nugget Nell, but I do know that this young lady goes by no such cog."

"Another thing; I've promised to protect her, an' Jim Harding keeps his word! I'll fight you

and your whole gang, if you'll give me fair play—one or two at a time. I don't scare worth a cent!

"There lies my passenger," he continued, laying Nellie gently on the sward, as he spoke, "an' here stands Jim Harding, ready to put a ventilator into the carcass of any man who attempts to do her harm. I'm right here, an' your whole gang can't move me the width of a hair!"

The pale, determined face of the driver indicated business, and his heroic daring against such odds surprised and won the admiration of the outlaws, one and all.

"You're a good boy, Jim," said the chief; "and we wouldn't hurt you for the world. Neither will we molest the lady. But I tell you—'Honest Injun,' Jim Harding—that is Nugget Nell; and she's playing tricks on you. She's the brashest and smartest piece of calico up or down the range."

"I'm sorry your coach is wrecked, Jim; but you were stubborn, you see, and I knew pretty well how it would be. So I stretched the rope. We are desperately in need of funds, and so something desperate had to be did. I knew you a long way off on the plain by the cut of your jib."

"Take good care of the girl, Jim; get your team together, and strike out for the station. It's all fair enough—the company is rich, and we are poor."

"Don't fret about the coach; they have plenty more of them. I'll see you later, Jim. When you want a lift, call on Doubloon Dan, Captain of the Pumas!"

The next moment the outlaw chief, at the head of his men, galloped up the steep bank, and away; carrying with them the registered letters, and forty thousand dollars in gold from the safe of Wells, Fargo & Co., which they had blown open.

As the bandits rode off, poor Nellie Belzer opened her eyes in wonder, which speedily changed to terror when she remembered what had occurred. But the sight of Jim Harding standing near her, letting down the hammers of his revolvers, told her that all was well; and she sprung to her feet, grasped his hands, and thanked him, with both tongue and eyes, for having protected her.

Truly the poor girl had escaped most miraculously from her enemies, as well as from death in the overturned coach; and she fell upon her knees in thankful prayer, while Jim and the two passengers were getting the bruised horses into leading trim.

Jim, whose faith had been somewhat shaken by the decided assertions of the outlaw chief in regard to his protegee being Nugget Nell—a young woman well known along the range as a daring and reckless girl, who generally wandered about in male attire—when he perceived how the maiden was now occupied, cursed himself heartily for having allowed the slightest doubt of her truthfulness to enter his mind.

In less than a half hour after the catastrophe, the "outsides," who had been robbed of every dollar they possessed, mounted two of the horses, while Jim placed Nellie upon another. He then sprung upon a fourth, and, leading the remaining pair, they all proceeded to the station. Having arrived there, Jim assisted Nellie to a seat in the coach for Chico City, bade her good-by, while with much emotion she promised to see him again in Santa Fe.

The driver cracked his whip, and the "hearse" on the branch line dashed toward the range, ten miles away.

CHAPTER X.

NUGGET NELL.

CHICO CITY had been but recently "slapped up," and was located in New Mexico, near the Colorado line, at the base of the Rocky Mountains, and not half a day's ride from where the Rayton Mountains branch off eastward from the main backbone of the Great Divide.

The "burg" consisted of some sixty shanties, constructed in a primitive manner, and among which were the usual number of drinking saloons found in a new mining town.

Gambling-rooms were connected with each, or, generally speaking, gaming was carried on in the same or only room in the rear of the building, the bar being in front.

There were three hotels, so-called, neither of which was over a story in height, the sleeping apartments being in the attic, it being partitioned off with white cotton cloth, and reached by a ladder.

Quartz mills had been in operation for several weeks at the commencement of our narrative, and many persons had been drawn to Chico City, as is usually the case, by exaggerated reports of the rich "finds" in the near vicinity.

Thus far the town had prospered far beyond the expectations of old miners, although none but capitalists had profited to any extent, if we except the gamblers and saloon-keepers.

Some pocket gold had been found in the gulches, enough to cause much interest in old hand prospectors, who, however, searched more for silver "show" than for aught else.

Chico City was but a short distance from the

little creek that, flowing south for seventy-five miles, and thence east through the Texas Pan-Handle and the Indian Nation, empties into the Arkansas, and is known as the Canadian river—a stream upon the banks of which have been perpetrated the most terrible tragedies, and where have been fought the most severe fights between whites and reds; whose bottom timber has echoed to the shrieks of anguish drawn from hundreds of poor tortured souls, as the fiendish Kiowas or Comanches have danced around them.

There is also another creek flowing from the Rayton Mountains south, uniting with the one just mentioned, the two forming the source of the Canadian, and the junction being some twenty miles southeast of Chico City.

Towering adamant mountains rear high their terrific sides above the town; indeed, so near to it that a horseman could be recognized as he rode up the winding trails along the side of the range, and a yell from any of the lower cliffs could be heard from the street of Chico City.

It is hardly necessary to say that strangers were coming and going at all times.

The old Santa Fe trail and stage route, pointing south from Bent's Fort, on the Arkansas, in Colorado, passing through a gap of the Rayton Mountains, thence on down the range to Fort Union and San Miguel, and thence west to Santa Fe, passes but ten miles east of Chico City, and leaves its passengers at a station on the little creek formerly mentioned, and which swells eventually into the Canadian.

The near vicinity of Rayton Pass leads north to Trinidad; and San Christo Pass, in the main range, is but fifty miles to the northwest, where, *via* Fort Garland, the west side of the Great Divide could be reached; together with the fact that it was known there was a way of crossing the range at or near the point where the Rayton Mountains branched off.

This was directly to the west of the Divide, and opening out at a point nearly due west of Costello, Colorado. All these facts caused Chico City, and its near vicinity to be a most favorable place for "road-agents," or border bandits, to rendezvous with safety to themselves, and with a wide field open to their operations.

Being on the line of travel, south and north, and on the near eastern side of the Rocky Mountains, caused the burg to be also a favorable halting-place for the many wandering and desperate characters, who assumed to be miners or prospectors; in reality, blacklegs of all nationalities.

There was but one street in the town, and it ran north and south, and parallel with the range. It consisted of two rows of shanties, that had been erected without regard to their being exactly on the square, or of uniform frontage.

But half a dozen or so of these were larger than the others. These extended back further, and were of wider dimensions, but like the rest, were only one story in height.

The branch stage line, which brought passengers from the main line at the station on the creek, ten miles distant, followed a wagon trail, which wound around the side of a foot-hill north of the town, and swept down the same into the street.

The lay of the land, a gentle decline, allowed Jehu to show off his stock and his dexterity at the same time, by gathering the "ribbons" in his right hand, and with bugle in left blowing a mellow *reveille* to the "citiz," and welcome to the outsiders and insides, an opportunity greatly appreciated and prized in by the drivers on the border, who are as hardy, brave, happy, and free-hearted a class of men as can be found in any part of the world.

The drive of which we have spoken is a perilous one, as the coach whips at times along at great speed, where the least heed of the nags would hurl it over precipices. From one to five hundred feet in depth. It is on the old San Antonio and El Paso section of the San Antonio and San Diego stage mail route, the section being seven hundred miles in length, and the whole route fourteen hundred.

Most of it was through the Indian-haunted wilds, where not unfrequently the driver and passengers were butchered or tortured, the coach burned, and the horses or mules eaten by a yelling horde of war-painted, feather-bedizened savages.

But, to return to our story.

Chico City boasted of one really first-class saloon and gambling-room combined—that is first-class for a new mining-town. It was known as Pilgrim's Palace, and was sixty feet in length and fifteen in breadth; the bar occupying twenty feet of the front, and the gaming department the remainder.

There was no partition between: nothing except a single downward step from the bar to the long array of card tables, where roulette, faro, and monte could be indulged in, or even eucher, if one could succeed in getting up a game.

The dealers, as a rule, were dissatisfied with this step arrangement. They asserted that the gambling-room ought to have been elevated one step at least above the floor of the bar. This,

they said, would have been more appropriate; for they contended that a man could not get down any deeper than whisky would take him. But the barkeeper swore there ought to have been a long flight of stairs from his department, down into the card-room, for it took years for a man to ruin himself by drink, while a gambler would set a man flat on his back, and craze him in a single night.

There was a long bench on the side of the room across from the bar, which was usually filled with these impecunious wretches, known as bummers, or dead-beats; and, at the opening of our narrative, the usual audience was in attendance—in fact, the "anxious seats" were packed; for it was night in Chico City, and night meant business.

Indeed, seldom did a night pass, in the infant burg, without a "pic-nic" of some kind; for the denizens of the Divide banked after fun and excitement not a little. This was very natural, when we consider that there was a large number of "old-timers" from up, down, and over the range among the residents; and not a few who had located in huts, or "wicky-ups," among the cedars in the rear of the west line of shanties.

On this particular night, however, the bar was deserted, with the exception of the "bummers" aforesaid, and one other individual, whom we will shortly notice.

The center of attraction was in the gambling-room, where a newly-arrived sport, with an abundance of "rocks," was not only holding his own against the expert "pasteboard-flippers," but "jist a-rakin' things clean," as an admiring miner expressed it.

However, the previously mentioned individual at the bar must first claim our attention.

He was a burly, gigantic man, with long unkempt hair and beard of reddish hue; red, sun-burnt nose and cheeks, and blood-shot eyes, which were small and deep-set, and having overhanging brows that met and mingled, giving him a most ruffianly appearance, which was quite uncalled for, as his other features expressed such a character sufficiently.

He wore a red shirt, open at the neck, with a wide flowing collar. A pair of corduroy breeches were thrust into high-topped cow-hide boots, and a soft, wide-brimmed sombrero, pushed backward on his head in a defiant manner, completed his costume.

A belt at his waist supported the usual huge bowie-knife, brace of revolvers and cartridge-pouch, and he leaned one elbow upon the bar, glaring across the room at the bench of bummers as he spoke.

An empty glass was at his side on the counter, intimating that he had just imbibed his favorite beverage, which, judging from his countenance, was no very mild stimulant.

With an insulting glance toward the row of "left outs," and squirting a stream of tobacco juice high in the air in the direction of his innocent and unappreciative, not to say alarmed, audience, he blurted out:

"I war in ther fust class when I 'tended skule, an' I stud at ther head. I gut some consid'able edicache, but I bucked ag'in' ther teacher an' dissected the soft-headed cuss, an' then sot ther hull o' ther skollars on a stompede. Then I burned ther durned skule-house an' lit out o' civerlize fer good."

"Since then I've meandered permisc'us like, from Minny-sote ter New Mex', an' 'cross country ter 'Frisco, 'sides skutin' up nigh on ter Walla-Walla."

"I've shuck paws with a heap o' p'ison whisk, snakes an' other animiles o' thet kind, an' I gin'rally let ther pilgrims know they hes ter keep off'n my grass, er git bored. I war burned with a full set o' grinders, an' I kin show es many notches on my shooter es ary bad cit' on t'is er t'other side ther range. Yes sir-ree! thet's me!"

"Ary pilgrim what wan ter whoop'er up me, I'm ther man fer his money, an' I air a-standin' flat-footed. I'm loose gilled sardine an' I never war kerral'd, 'er cin' on't, an' then I bu'st ther box. Does ever buddy hear me?"

"I'm a preachin', an' I'm her wickedest man in ther meetin'. I'm ther tuckleberry what's never been picked. Jist ha a dozen o' you-uns come hyer an' shake my butt a liddle fer fun, jist ter fin' out ef I drap eas!"

Silence reigned in the bar. Not one of the bummers lisped a word, but gazed one at another questioningly, as if each expected the other to speak or make a move.

All of them were desperate for a drink, and they cared not in what manner it was obtained. But while they saw, from the amused smile and encouraging look of the bartender, that the man who started a "circus" for the giant would meet with favor in his direction, they were all too shaky on their pins to make a "break."

Their naturally brave and fearless natures were demoralized, almost paralyzed, by the universal curse of the human race.

"Doesn't yer hear ther ding-dong o' my iron heart?" continued the bully, as he walked to the lunch-bowl and shoved into his capacious mouth a handful of crackers. "Doesn't yer hear ther crunch o' my quartz-mill? I kin snap up a buffer bull on ther stompede an' chaw him down, hide an' horns. Then I kin take a sot down at

ther foot o' ther range an' crunch bowlders ter 'sist my digest mersheenery!"

"Perhaps you'll run ag'in' some one in this town that'll chaw you up," said the barkeeper, as he polished a glass. "What's yer cog, an' where did yer come from?"

The giant turned quicky, to study for an instant the face of the vender of liquors, but he answered him with a changed voice, for he knew that it would be imprudent to pick a quarrel with one connected with the establishment.

"Boss," said he, "they calls me ther Terrantaler o' Taos, an' I need a heap o' chawin'. I've hed half-a-dozen allergators a nibblin' et my carkiss ter on't, an' all ther time I war chock full o' laugh. I'm tough, I am! An' ef yer knows a pilgrim 'bout ther burg, what yer reckons 'ud buck ag'in' me, I'd be 'bleeged ef yer'd slide him out. Jist do it, boss, an' I'll chaw him up 'fore yer kin say Amen!"

"You're a liar, by the watch. You couldn't scare a cotton-tailed rabbit, or stampede a flock of goats!"

These words came from behind him.

The "Terrantaler o' Taos" whirled in his tracks as quick as a flash, his flushed face filled with the utmost amazement, as he gazed toward the point whence this most insulting assertion had proceeded—the front entrance of the bar.

There, leaning carelessly against the end of the green screen, was what had the appearance of a youth of seventeen or thereabouts—a boy, with a handsome face and dashing air, and habited in a suit of buckskin that was profusely ornamented with bullion buttons in Mexican style.

A close fitting jaqueta set off his graceful, slender form to the greatest advantage.

The new arrival had blue eyes, long wavy hair, and a beardless face; and he wore about his waist a richly ornamented belt, which supported a brace of silver-mounted revolvers and a gold-hilted bowie-knife.

His black sombrero sat jauntily upon one side of his head, tipped back slightly, and was bound with gold lace, a golden snake acting as band, with jewels in place of eyes.

His pantaloons were tucked into high-topped French boots, well fitting his small feet, and upon the heels were a pair of silver spurs, to which were attached tiny tinkling bells.

There was a daring dash, and an unflinching, sneering glance in the eyes of the youthful stranger, that told of a bravery and a recklessness that was uncommon in one so young, and apparently so delicately nurtured.

"Stranger," said the Tarantula of Taos, as quickly as he turned and saw a human form, and before he had examined the face and general "make-up" of this new arrival. "Stranger, war yer 'dressin' yer complements ter me, er ter some other pilgrim? I'm ther Terrantaler o' Taos, an' I'm in ther habit o' drinkin' a bar'l o' bleed afore breckfust every mornin'."

"Precisely," answered the youth. "And I'm a lightning-bug. Just watch sharp, and you'll see my wings flash."

As he thus spoke, the gayly attired youth darted forward like lightning, and before the "Terrantaler" realized that he had even changed his position, sprung upward, knocked the hat from the giant's head, giving him at the same time a sounding slap in the face; and then, bounding some five paces away, stood with folded arms and smiling face, gazing at the astonished, dumfounded braggart, whose face was now pale, and his tongue, for once, speechless.

A roar of laughter rung from the bummers on the bench, and the barkeeper called out, gleefully:

"Hurrah for Nugget Nell! She's paralyzed the articulatin' machine of the Terrantaler of Taos!"

At this moment, sounds of confusion, pistol-shots, loud oaths, cheers and yells commingled, proceeded from the gambling end of the building.

Only for an instant stood the burly giant. Then he drew his bowie, and approached, half-bent the girl in male attire, who called out:

"Don't any of you interfere in this little game, if you don't want to get bored! I can hold my own with this bully and braggart, and a little more. I have been laying for him—I, Nugget Nell, the Waif of the Rockies!"

CHAPTER XI.

CRUSHING A TARANTULA.

THE "Terrantaler o' Taos" had entered Pilgrim's Palace but a few minutes previous to his being brought before the notice of the reader, and had not passed back into the gambling-room.

Had he done so, and "shot off his tongue," as he had done in the bar-room, he would doubtless have had business on his hands at once; for there never was a more motley crowd of border men of desperate stamp collected together.

All of them were intensely eager and watchful for any chance to turn their bad luck; many of them careless of the manner, honestly or dishonestly.

And there never had, in the history of Chico City, been more men collected in Pilgrim's Palace, than on the present occasion.

And never was there such a mixed, lawless crowd, so silent, and so interested in the movements, and words, and actions of one man; every eye chained upon him, all seeming petrified, so lost to themselves, that for once they forgot the bar and its enticements—forgot to call upon the dealers to order a general "errigate."

And, indeed, upon this occasion, there were little or no grounds to demand favors from the gamblers; and none at all, after the stranger, alluded to in the last chapter, had "got down to his work."

It was only about ten minutes previous to the entrance of the Tarantula of Taos into the bar, that this stranger had come in, and passed at once into the gaming-room; drawing, as he did so, by his air and presence, all loungers to the same point, except the bummers, who were so far gone that they had no interest in anything outside of a decanter.

This man was of commanding mien, handsome in face, and not more than thirty years of age, with long, dark-brown hair hanging over his shoulders.

He was straight as a forest pine, with a noble physique, and bright, piercing hazel eyes, that caught and held those of another at once, and seemed to read him through and through at the same time.

Above the medium height, and with not an ounce of superfluous flesh, he was a model of manhood and intelligence, brave, dashing, and fearless; prince of prairie and mountain, as dress, manner, words, and actions, each and all, clearly proved.

Take him for all in all, he was a man who would claim and command the attention of any crowd.

A silky mustache and imperial, dark-brown in color, enhanced his dashing air.

The stranger was none other than Rocky Mountain Al.

The few who caught sight of him as he stepped down from the bar-room drew the attention of the others immediately to the new arrival; and, before he had half crossed the room, all eyes were upon him, and all had become silent.

With a cheery "Good-evening, gentlemen!" he walked up to a table, saying, with a smile of gratification:

"Ah, here is my favorite game! Boys, what is your limit?"

The dealer and the payer exchanged glances of surprise, for this was the first time since they had struck Chico City that any one had intimated an inclination to "tap their bank."

There were several piles of silver dollars in the middle of the table, as is usual; the same inclosing neatly arranged stacks of twenty, ten, five, and two-and-a-half dollar gold pieces.

"Let's see, Bill," said the dealer to his pard.

"How much have we to lose?"

"We'll allow this gentleman to tap the bank, if he wishes; but," said the other, "we'll have no limit."

This he said with a wink, to reassure his pard, who had put on a dubious, hesitating look.

"Give us a new deal, and mix the cards good!" directed the stranger, in a commanding voice.

By this time every one had left the other tables, and an immense crowd surged around the monte table: none, however, interfering with the free movements of the man who had attracted so much curiosity.

"Bud" opened a small, silver-bound spei box that sat on the end of the table, and taking from it a package, opened the same, and disclosed a new pack of Mexican cards. Running the pasteboards off, and throwing out the ten, nine, and eight spots, as is usual in preparing the deck for monte, he quickly shuffled.

All saw that "Bud," who was always calm and indifferent, let the bank be winning or losing, seemed now nervous and apprehensive.

It was with good reason, for his little all was in the bank, depending upon the turning up of a single card, if the stranger persisted in his proclaimed intention of "tapping the bank."

In addition to this, he had been greatly impressed by the bold and assured air of the new arrival.

There was not another man in the room who, if he had offered to tap the bank, would have caused Bud the slightest concern. Just the opposite. He would have been elated, filled with joy to have had such an offer. But all gamblers are superstitious; and Bud, from the moment the stranger walked up to his table, felt a presentiment of coming misfortune.

Time proved that this was not unfounded, although, for the like of him, Bud, as he explained in a low, muttered voice to his pard, could not account for the almost certain conviction that the bank was "gone up." Not even was this the case, when he had time to reason over his foolishness, as he shuffled the new deck. Bill, however, laughed and sneered at the weakness of his pard.

"Cut the cards, sir," said Bud, after he had shuffled to his satisfaction, and bringing the even deck down with a whack in front of the stranger.

The dashing young scout reached out his hand, and delicately lifted only two cards from

the top of the deck, laying them down beside the others.

A murmur of surprise ran around the crowd.

This changed to admiration at the cuteness of the stranger; for, although not a man in the room had ever seen such a cut made in monte before, all who had any sense knew that the proposed better had, if the dealer had "stocked" the cards, "blocked" his game, for the latter must have calculated upon at least one-third of the cards being cut from the top, to be placed upon the bottom previous to a throwing "lay-out."

As the stranger cut, he jerked with his disengaged hand a roll of greenbacks from his pouch, and twirling the same in his fingers, spread them upon the table. Then, picking the notes up, one by one, he again gave them a flip in the air, disclosing, as they came down, their denomination—fifty, one hundred, and twenty dollar-notes, to the amount of some two or three thousand dollars.

Again a murmur ran around the crowd; this time of respect and gratification, for all had been very favorably impressed by the newcomer, and such a display of wealth as this clinched the nail.

"Bizaess!"

"No slouch."

"He's a tart with a thick crust."

"Good-by, Bill and Bud!"

"I'd like dog-goned well ter pard wi' thet pilgrim."

"Somebody hold me tight, afore I make a break fer thet pile, an' spiles ther game!"

Such expressions could be heard in the crowd; but they were spoken in low tones, each one to his neighbor.

"Is that your cut, sir?" asked the dealer, while his pard across the table, for the first time showed something like surprise.

"That is my cut, sir. Give me a 'lay-out,' for I'm impatient to win or lose the amount you have in bank. I'm a-hankerin' arter a leetle excitement—dog my cats ef I ain't!"

And the scout, as he said this, cast a look around the crowd, with a winning smile upon his face.

Flitting as was the glance that he gave, he seemed to read every man in the assemblage.

Bud picked up the deck, and placed it upon the two cards the scout had cut, saying as he did so:

"It seems that you want those two cards in the first lay-out; that is, if I can make a lay-out from them."

"Is everything satisfactory?" he asked of his pard.

"Go ahead, Bud," said the other, impatiently.

The deck was turned; the first card that had been cut proving to be a tray.

Again it was turned; this time displaying the other, which was also a tray.

This proved the stranger correct, and no lay-out.

Once more the deck was turned, and a deuce showed up; but only to be cast out on the cloth, followed by an ace. This made a lay-out.

"There you are, sir; deuce and ace!" said Bud.

The scout turned the deuce around endways, asking:

"How much have you in bank?"

"About a thousand dollars," was the answer.

"I tap the bank on the deuce. Pull your cards!"

Every eye was strained—fixed upon the deck as Bud turned the same face up, and drew the first card.

The face card was a king, the next a jack, then a four, and then a deuce.

The young scout had broken the bank, and a wild cheer rung from the crowd.

"Pass your bags, gentlemen! You have no further use for them," said the winner, in an off-hand manner, as though the breaking of a bank was a common occurrence in his experience.

With an oath of intense chagrin and rage Bud hurled the deck of cards to the floor, and tearing the buckskin bags from the back of his chair, flung them upon the table spitefully; while his pard, with the utmost amazement, gazed with fixed stare at the winner, who dexterously transferred the silver to one bag, and the gold to another, as he coolly moved on toward the roulette-table.

"Don't be down-hearted, boys," he said. "I see you are new to the business, or you wouldn't allow this to affect you in the least; that is, of course, to outward appearances. But here"—returning to the monte-table—"I won your money fairly, which is perhaps more than you can say of some of it. Take a hundred apiece with my compliments; I'm no hog, dog-goned if I am!"

"I'll see you later, boys; an' if you ever strike Santa Fe way, an' want a stake, or if the Apaches confiscate your nags in my locate, I'll freeze to you as a true pard, an' stick as tight as the bark to a black-jack!"

The stranger, by showing that he was capable of talking "States style," and at the same time by assuming the slang utterances of a prairie or

mountain man, became more popular with the crowd.

Especially was this the case after he had returned a hundred dollars each to the monte-dealers.

However, they proved themselves unworthy of such liberality on his part, for they sullenly received the money, casting threatening glances as the stranger turned his back to leave the table.

"Say!" cried out Bill in a surly tone, "I reckon, seein' you've broke our bank, you bain't no objections to slingin' your cog. We don't know you, an' we don't know your friends."

The scout turned on the instant, his eyes flashing, as he replied significantly:

"They call me Rocky Mountain Al down country, and I carry my friends with me."

As he spoke he transferred the bag of gold to his left hand, in which he then held both, and clapped his right hand on his revolver.

As he did so, Bill sprang to his feet, his face furious with passion, and whipped out his revolver, which he leveled at Rocky Mountain Al.

Quick as had been his movements, however, the young scout's were quicker, and the "Colt" of the latter belched fire at the moment that Bill's finger pressed the trigger, the bullet shattering the hand of the monte-dealer, and ranging up the bone of his arm, causing him, with a howl of pain and anguish, to drop his weapon.

But ere the pistol left his nerveless fingers the barrel became depressed, the revolver at the same time exploding within three feet of his partner, Bud, shooting the latter through the heart!

With a gasping, gurgling cry, Bud sprang from his chair, threw up his arms, and fell forward across the monte-table, dead, his head projecting over and his arms hanging down on the opposite side.

With shattered, blood-dripping hand, Bill stood for a moment, his face the pallor of death, his eyes bulging from their sockets, gazing in horror and agony at the corpse of his pard. Then his form swayed back and forth, and he, too, fell forward across the body of the unfortunate Bud.

While this was going on the crowd stood still, dazed and speechless; but this singular ending of the tragedy did not chain the attention of the young scout for a moment, for his ear, in the stillness that followed, had caught sounds from the bar which drew all his attention.

One glance was sufficient.

It showed him a burly, whisky and passion-inflamed man, half-bent, and with a knife in his hand, approaching a slender youth with evidently murderous intent. The youth was also clutching a glittering bowie, and standing, perfectly fearless to all appearance, ready to meet and to battle with his giant adversary.

Flitting as was the glance which the scout caught, to his joy he recognized the original of the photograph shown him by Major Belzer, and, although she was in male attire, Al was positive that Nellie Belzer was before him.

In half-a-dozen wild bounds he was at the bar; then, with all the force of his strong arm, he hurled the bag of silver dollars through the air, just as the giant borderer was in the act of springing upon his slender adversary.

The heavy buckskin bag struck the ruffian full in the forehead, and he fell with such force as to shake the building; at the same time the bag burst, and the silver dollars flew through the air in all directions, glittering in the bright lamp-light, and then rolled about the floor.

"Help yourselves, boys!" called out Al.

"This is my pic-nic, and I pay all the bills!" As he thus yelled, he sprang forward, to gain the side of the youth he believed to be Nellie Belzer in disguise, and whom he had doubtless saved from death; but the bummers had made a rush for the dollars, and in the confusion the gayly attired youth, who had been in such deadly peril, disappeared.

The roof of Pilgrim's Palace was now almost lifted by the wild yells of the motley crowd, who rushed to the bar, totally unmindful of the ghastly lay-out on the monte table, but a few yards from them!

CHAPTER XII.

THE TWO NELLIES.

WHEN Jim Harding assisted Nellie Belzer into the coach on the branch line to Chico City, and bade her farewell, the poor girl felt as though she had parted from her last friend on earth.

She felt sure that if Jim had not protected her, the bandits would have robbed her of her last dollar; and in that case, she would indeed have been in a most pitiable and truly miserable condition,—at the mercy of her enemies, and the lawless element of the range.

She had disposed of her jewels, and had nearly three thousand dollars, in greenbacks, yet remaining, after her traveling and hotel expenses had been paid; and she supposed, now that she knew her father had come in search of her, that the latter would be short of funds, consequently she wished to be prudent in her expenditures.

However she cared not whether her father or herself had a penny, provided she could but find him.

There were no other passengers in the coach for Chico City; and Nellie, as she took her seat, felt thankful for it, and began planning for the future.

Jim Harding had requested the Chico driver to "drop" his passenger at the most respectable and retired public place in the town, and to keep an eye open for her on his account. This the jehu had faithfully promised to do; a promise which he determined to fulfill to the letter although he had not seen the beautiful sad face beneath the veil.

The robbery of the coach on the main line was a piece of news, the particulars of which were astounding to Job Jason; and he was eager to "empty his budget" in the Pilgrim's Palace to attentive listeners.

The Pumas, from down country, had located near Chico City—that was evident—and Captain Doubloon Dan was the very man to make things lively, both north and south of Rayton Pass.

Job made the Concord coach hum over the plain, in among the foothills, and down the street of Chico City, to the lower end of the rows of shanties, stopping at the "Bug Juice Bazaar." Here, he sprung from the coach, entered, and, calling the landlord aside, engaged the only two apartments in the "hotel" for a lady who was in delicate health, and who wanted the quietest place in town; telling mine host that Jim Harding, who "jerked ribbons" on the main line, was anxious that the lady should receive the best attention, and a good many guests would be gained by favoring a friend of Jim's.

Everything being satisfactorily arranged, Job returned to the coach and escorted Nellie, who was still closely veiled, to the rear of the Bug Juice Bazaar, the chambers of which were accessible by a rough and narrow stairway on the outside back end of the building.

On entering she found that she would be obliged to walk exactly beneath the ridge-pole to avoid striking her head against the roof. Job attended to the bringing up of her baggage, in person; and, requesting her to send for him to Pilgrim's Palace, if she needed his services in any way, took his leave.

Nellie thanked him very sincerely, and the driver mounted to his seat, and drove to the stables; when, after unhitching and feeding the horses, he repaired quickly to Pilgrim's Palace, to "irrigate," and to astonish the "citz" and "tenderfeet" at the same time by a detailed account of the daring robbery, and the manner in which it had been accomplished, and by whom.

The news flew like wildfire; and a notice of the coming of Barnum's Mammoth Combination, with Jumbo included, would not have created more interest and excitement.

The fact that the notorious Doubloon Dan and his Pumas were in the vicinity of Chico caused intense amazement to all; and fun was anticipated in and around the burg in consequence.

For several days Nellie kept her room, suffering from nervous prostration, the result of her great anxiety of mind while in El Paso, at ascertaining that Lucretia and Carl had followed her to the frontier, and were under the same roof as herself, as well as from her terrible experience at the ford on Canadian Creek, when the coach was wrecked and robbed.

However, had the girl been in good health and spirits, she would not have dared appear on the street, for fear of meeting some spy, employed by her enemies.

It was about a week after her arrival, and on the day previous to the advent of Rocky Mountain Al and the Tarantula of Taos in Chico City, that Nellie was sitting by the rear window, which was merely four panes of six by eight glass, set in a rough home-made frame, when she was surprised by a light, springy step on the outside rough stairway, altogether different from the slow and heavy pace of her stout landlady, who never mounted to her room but with great difficulty, the stairs creaking threateningly under her.

Hastily rising to her feet, Nellie stood, with timidity and apprehension imprinted upon her countenance, fearing that Lucretia Cole had discovered her place of hiding, and had come to make sure of her identity.

There came a slight tap on the door, then the same opened quickly, and a youth entered. Putting a finger over his lips, in sign of silence and caution, he closed the door, and then whirled and placed his back against it.

Glancing around the room, the stranger then fixed his eyes steadily upon its occupant. The face of the terrified maiden grew as white as death, and she grasped the back of a chair for support, her features expressing the utmost amazement, while she brushed her hand over her eyes, as if to banish a disagreeable vision.

Nellie could scarce believe her senses; for there, standing before her, was a youth whose face was exactly like her own, except the bronzed skin, and the daring and reckless expression of the eyes.

She was dumfounded and speechless.

Not so, however, was her strange visitor;

who, with great vivacity and assurance, broke out in a voice that seemed to Nellie the echo of her own:

"Don't be alarmed, namesake mine! You and I must be friends—true friends from the word 'Go.'"

"I am Nell—Nugget Nell, of the Rocky Range, and everybody knows me up country. I'm as astonished as you are; I am perfectly set back, in regard to the strong resemblance between us, and it takes a heap to bewilder Nugget Nell."

"You see I wear men's togs. Well, it's just because I'm laying for a man, who has got to pass in his chips when I fasten my eyes on him."

"I'm a decent girl, Nellie, and no one can say a word against me since I've been up and down the range. A vile scoundrel deceived me, and caused me to leave my happy home in St. Louis. He had, before I met him, been in this section of the country. He professed to be a mining speculator, but I believe now that he was nothing but a 'card sharp.'"

"I was almost insane when I came here, but I had plenty of money, and I have found considerable gold since. I prospect and sell my 'finds,' and I am generally lucky, as any one will tell you."

"But I live only for revenge. I lie in wait and watch every stage up or down country—watch for the dastard who blighted my life and made me a wanderer. But I go everywhere unmolested. None dare insult me by word or look."

"It matters not how I came to know of you; but I learned that a young woman came in the stage, last week, from Santa Fe, who resembled me, and was supposed by some to be myself on some ma querading frolic. Don't be afraid of me, Nellie—you can trust me. Your troubles shall be my troubles, your enemies my enemies. Tell me all about yourself; why you are here on the border, a helpless, unprotected girl. You may safely confide in Nugget Nell."

The disguised girl addressed Nellie Belzer in a quick and nervous manner; her expression of face and eyes showing great respect, and a longing for the confidence of her listener. So earnest and sincere were these fellyings manifested in voice, look and manner, and so favorably was Nellie impressed by her out-spoken manner, that she put forth her hand, which the other eagerly grasped.

"Sit down," said Nugget Nell, speaking hastily; "sit down, and tell me all your troubles. I'll stand by you, and assist you in everything. I do or die, when I make a break in the way of serving a friend. Tell me what brought you to the Rockies, and what is the cause of your evident sorrow?"

Nellie Belzer felt that at last, she had found one in whom she could confide all her history; and that her mind would be greatly relieved by so doing.

Placing a chair for her visitor, and seating herself opposite, without reserve, Nellie told her entire family history, the cause of her leaving home, and her object in braving the dangers of the wilds of the far West.

The incarceration of her father in an insane asylum, the departure of Herbert Ives, her lover, for the Rocky Mountains, her own escape from her persecutors, her resolve to search for Herbert, her fruitless wanderings, and the discovery of her enemies in Santa Fe; all, together with the intelligence she had gained, while listening to their conversation, in regard to the escape of her father, and his presence on the border—everything; even the compact between Lucretia and Carl Cole with the Tarantula of Taos, was minutely explained to the eagerly listening waif of the mountains.

Having narrated all this, Nellie next produced photographs of her father, of Herbert Ives, of Carl and Lucretia; copies of which she gave to Nugget Nell, who studied them all with interest.

The last one she inspected was that of Carl Cole.

No sooner had Nugget Nell glanced at this picture, than she gave a half scream, half shriek, dropped the other pictures, and with clinched hands and grating teeth, her eyes blazing like those of a tigress bereft of her young, she paced the floor in long strides, holding out the card at arm's length.

Nellie Belzer gazed upon her strangely acting visitor with the utmost amazement, fearing that the eccentric girl had lost her senses.

In a few moments, however, she paused; stopped short in the middle of the room, and fixed her wild eyes upon her companion. Only for an instant; then she broke forth in a rapid voice, filled with mingled fury and exultation.

"Nellie, my new-found friend and sister! The God of justice has been sent you to the wilds of the Rockies, to give Nugget Nell her revenge!"

"This coward, this fiend, who is with his so-called wife upon your track, is the villain who deceived me by a false marriage, when I was an innocent and confiding girl. We will join hands in the hunt. He will come, as you say, to Chico City, without doubt—this miscreant, who calls himself Carl Cole; and I will be ready for

him! I will torture him, as he has tortured me.

"I'll shoot him! I'll cut out his heart! I'll gaze into his eyes, as they film in death, and I'll taunt him, and spit upon him!"

"I swear it, by the hopes I have of meeting, in another world, my innocent child! I swear it, by everything on earth, and under the earth! I, the Waif of the Rockies, Nugget Nell!"

The slapping the face of the Tarantula of Taos, in Pilgrim's Palace, was the first "break" made by the wild girl toward proving her friendship for Nellie Belzer; the circumstances of which have been already detailed.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE "FIND" IN THE GULCH.

ONE mile and a half up the range, north from Chico City, a narrow gulch wound between the foot-hills, and extended in between two bluffs; a wide, gaping cleft in the adamantine range, a rushing torrent flowing along its bed during heavy rains.

For a thousand yards this gulch extended toward the heart of the mountains, and then ended in a sharp point. Within fifty yards of this point was a small spring of water, oozing from the cliff-side into a mossy rock basin, on a level with the gulch bed; the surplus water being lost in the sand.

A thick clump of cedars grew on either side of the spring, much more luxuriant, and of a richer green than the surrounding shrubs and trees, from its near proximity to the spring.

About the same time that the Tarantula of Taos was expatiating upon his prowess in Pilgrim's Palace, a party of three rode up to the gulch, and halting at the spring, dismounted in a stiff and weary manner, indicating that their ride had been a long and tedious one during the day.

They were all young; one of them, a boy of not more than fifteen years of age.

Assisting this lad in removing the equipments of his horse, and showing a tender solicitude for him, was a young man of twenty-one years, about five feet ten inches in height and somewhat slender in mold; although showing muscular strength, and a quickness of action that was remarkable.

His complexion was dark, and his hair, side-whiskers and mustache were black, shining and glossy.

His name was Herbert Howard Ives, and the youth was his brother Charles, dubbed by the former and his companion, "Little Pard."

The other young man was shorter in height, and of more slender build; with brown hair, and eyes that were sharp, honest, and magnetic.

There was an energy of action about his every movement, and in the glance of his eye, that proved him well fitted for roughing it on the border.

In fact, none but such men as this same George Belzer, and Herbert Ives, are to be found so far out on the frontiers; and none except such can hope to contend with the privations and hardships incident to prairie and mountain roving.

"How do you feel, Charley?" asked Herb of his brother, as he threw himself upon the grass, near the cedars, wearily, after drinking from the spring.

"Little Pard is all right," put in George Belzer, without giving the boy time to answer. "He wants a good square meal, and a night's rest; that is all. Then he'll be as fresh as a daisy."

"You're right, George," said Charley. "I don't suffer any very great inconvenience from riding now; though, when we first started, I used to wish myself, every night, back with father in Brooklyn."

"Yes, Charley," said Herb, "and I do most sincerely wish that you had remained at home, for I am in almost constant anxiety on your account. There are reports of Apache raids down the range, and we ought to go as far as Santa Fe, and then turn up the west side of the mountains, and back to Colorado."

"Don't fret, Herb," returned George. "Little Pard and I intend each to carry an Apache scalp or two back to New York. I suppose you are expecting letters from Nellie, at Santa Fe?"

"I'm greatly mortified and worried," was the answer, "in regard to not having received any replies to my letters. I wrote Nellie to address me at Denver, Leadville, and Trinidad; but not a word have I received from her since I left New York."

"I fear that something unpleasant has occurred. Lucretia Lane, I suspect, has intercepted my letters, and prevented those that have been written me from being mailed. She and her lover, Carl Cole, are capable of any mean act; in fact, I believe they would commit crime to accomplish their ends."

"Nellie informed me, before we came away, that Lucretia had declared your uncle to be insane, and asserted that he ought to be sent to an asylum."

"When I return," said George. "I'll make a change in that establishment on the Hudson; even if I am censured for it by uncle George, who is in his second childhood. I'll kick that

contemptible scoundrel, Carl Cole, over the Palisades; and then run the ranch myself, until you marry Nellie. Then I'll gracefully yield up the reins of government to you. Poor Nellie is not of the kind of material to hold out against such a woman as Lucretia Lane. But, say; where the dickens is that bacon?"

"In my saddle-bags," answered Charley, "and the coffee also. Shall I get them for you, George?"

"No, Little Pard; you just squat where you are. Herb and I will shake out a square meal shortly. Say, Herb, I want to ask a favor of you!"

"It's granted in advance. What is it?"

"Just this. I want to eat one meal without chawing quartz with it. We've had mineralogy enough of late; at least I have, and I've heard so much about the various lodes of gold-bearing ore, and the silver quartz of Georgetown and Leadville, that I began to fancy for a time I was a millionaire, consequently it has been a heavy 'let down' to realize that I didn't have an interest in any of them."

"However, there is one advantage in hearing you talk. It is this. Your glowing Mosaic language contributes greatly to assist digestion; in fact, a fellow's grub digests altogether too quick, and one is hungry all the time."

"I believe I could eat a government mule steak without any inconvenience, provided you kept up your mineralogical lingo. It would make an ostrich smile, clear to the end of his tail-feathers, to have you make out a bill of fare, consisting of Colorado and New Mexico ores."

"I'll promise you not to mention anything in regard to my researches to-day," said Herbert.

"I have nearly worn out my hammer on Colorado rocks, and we have enough of them on all sides of us, without bringing them into conversation during supper, especially after you have given such a good reason why I should not. Speaking of grub, we must try and drop a buck, or a black bear, to-morrow."

"Now you're talking sense, Herb; that sort of thing is a long way ahead of quartz and pyrites."

"I agree with you, George," said Charley, as he helped himself to a fresh slice of bacon. "Herb is getting to be a monomaniac on the subject."

"I thought, boys," said Herbert, laughing, "that by special request all conversation in regard to mineralogy was to be dispensed with during this meal."

"That was the decision" agreed George; "but, you see, Herb, you have run in so many rocks on us since we left Pike's Peak, that all softer subjects have, somehow or other, become strange to us. However, we must make an effort to banish such topics. I would like much to know how my sweetheart in Poughkeepsie gets along. By the way, wouldn't it be a good idea for me to write, and have Ada go to uncle George's, and call upon Nellie? She could ascertain if your letters had been received and answered."

"I'm glad you thought of it, George! It's an excellent idea," returned Herbert. "Suppose you write to Miss Ada Johnson to-morrow."

"There is a new mining-town, called Chico City, that can't be far down the range, judging from the time we have put in on the trail since leaving Rayton Pass. We will run in there, write and mail some letters, and hope for the best."

The boy Charley, after eating, had reclined against his saddle, and, as Herbert spoke, was sleeping as peacefully as he could have done had he been at home and not in the wilds of the Rocky Mountains.

Herbert spread a blanket beneath the shade of the cedars, and then, with the help of George, bore him tenderly and carefully to it, laying him down without awakening him.

"I reckon, Herb," advised George, "that we had better secrete our tricks and traps in the thicket, for we don't know anything about this section, and some enemies might glide in on us."

"That's a good suggestion," said the other; "we'll do it, and then lead our horses down the gulch to where there is better grazing. This is a necessity, for we can't expect to travel unless the animals have sufficient feed during the night."

"But suppose some outlaw should appropriate them?"

"We must run the risk. The poor beasts must not suffer for grass when there is such good feed near at hand. I could not sleep a wink if I believed the animals to be suffering."

"All right," returned George. "We'll lead them down to the foot-hills and find a retired 'open' where we can leave them with safety."

Thus agreed, the two young men led the horses down the gulch, and, just as they had lariatied the beasts upon good grass in a small cedar-surrounded opening, a rifle-shot broke on the night air to the east, followed by two revolver-shots.

"Come on, Herb!" shouted George Belzer. "There is something wrong down the gulch. Some one may need our assistance and protection."

Drawing their revolvers, they started in a run.

On down the gulch they went, until nearly at a thick clump of cedars, where lay Rocky Mountain Al senseless, and Nugget Nell watching over him.

Hearing footsteps approaching, Nell passed quickly to that side of the thicket toward the range, parted the branches and peered out.

The moon was shining brightly.

Herbert and George were coming down the bed of the gulch on the run.

The eyes of the former were fastened upon the thicket ahead, when suddenly the branches parted and a female face was revealed.

Herbert Ives came to a sudden halt. His eyes were fixed and staring at the thicket, his face showed intense astonishment for a moment; then, clapping both hands to his forehead, he sunk with a groan upon the bed of the gorge, speechless for the moment and incapable of thought or movement.

Why Nugget Nell was in the thicket, and the cause of the scout's being senseless, will be explained later on.

CHAPTER XIV.

LITTLE PARD'S PERIL.

A MAD rush it was, for the dollars of Rocky Mountain Al, that rolled in every direction about the floor of Pilgrim's Palace; a rush that caused men to clutch, in fierce murderous fight, in their endeavor to get possession of them.

There were, however, enough of decent miners present, who cared nothing for the money thus lying around loose, but a great deal for the daring and dexterity of Al.

"Champagne, Tom Mathews! Champagne! We'll drown Rocky Mountain Al in champagne!"

Thus they shouted to the bar-keeper, who, pale as death, stood behind the bar, revolver in hand, while bullets were flying, knives cutting the air, and the Tarantula of Taos being trampled beneath the feet of the frenzied mob.

"Excuse me, pard!" yelled the scout, as he leaned over to the rear of the bar, and shouted in the ear of Tom Mathews: "Who was that fancy-dressed youth, the big cuss was going for; and where has he gone?"

Dodging a flying bowie-knife, that shattered a decanter behind him, the barkeeper replied:

"He was a girl—Nugget Nell!"

As he half-shrieked out these words, he pointed to the front entrance, in answer to the last question of Rocky Mountain Al.

No sooner did Mathews utter the name of the girl, then the scout sprang erect; a look of extreme pleasure and surprise upon his countenance, quickly changing to one of regret.

With a wild bound over the heads of some of the crowd, Al rushed like a madman out into the street.

It was bright moonlight; and, gazing first down between the long rows of shanties, and then up at the stage trail, he gave a yell of joy, and sprang around to the rear of Pilgrim's Palace.

Fastening hastily his bag of gold to his belt, as he ran, the scout soon reached a clump of cedars, within which he sprang to the side of his magnificent black horse, that welcomed him as he came.

Looseing the lariat from a tree, he coiled it, secured the rope to the horn of his saddle by the loop, mounted, and dashed into the street, and then north, like the wind, up the stage trail.

As Al reached the most elevated portion of the road, where it curved around the foot-hills, he halted suddenly, and cast piercing glances in every direction.

This was only for a moment. Then, with an exclamation of joy and relief, he left the trail, galloping at full speed directly toward the foot of the range, not far from his old position on the trail.

Ahead of him, galloped a horseman, whom the scout knew, from the buckskin costume covered with buttons that glittered in the moonlight, worn by him, to be a beautiful girl—one whom he had searched far and wide to find.

On rode Rocky Mountain Al, as if more than life depended upon his overtaking the rider in his front, who, turning and discovering him, drove spurs, and shot up the base of the range.

With a groan of disappointment at this, Al urged his horse to greater exertion.

He feared to shout, lest he should frighten the disguised girl.

He would give the world almost if he could give some sign to prove to her that he was her friend; but that was impossible, and a stern chase was long and doubtful.

Yet the scout was not hopeless.

Still on he went, until the ground became more broken, and he had gained greatly.

He is closing in, for his horse is fleet as the wind, and Nugget Nell rides a half-breed. Al was soon within a rifle-shot in distance, when, fearing she would dart into some loose covert of cedars, and thus be lost to him, he determined to hail her.

Both are now speeding along the brink of a wash-out, as he shouted, in a voice that ought to have convinced her he was no enemy:

"Nell! O-o-o-h, Nell!"

The shout seemed to be a signal for his doom,

for scarce had the last cry left his lips when the sharp crack of a rifle broke upon the night air, and the scout sunk forward upon his saddle-horn, as if stricken with death.

His noble black came to a sudden halt, as if conscious of his master's condition; and, as the animal stopped, Rocky Mountain Al slid from the saddle, and rolled down the steep bank of the wash-out to the edge of the cedars at its bed.

At the sound of the rifle-shot, Nugget Nell turned in her saddle, and saw her pursuer sink forward and fall to the earth!

With a wild cry, the disguised girl at the risk of her life urged her animal down into the wash-out, and galloped down its bed to the spot at which the young scout had disappeared.

She heard the clatter of the hoofs, and saw the black horse gallop back toward Chico City. She then knew that the assassin was in search of his victim.

Reaching the clump of cedars, and securing her horse on the opposite side from where the scout had fallen, knowing that no one from above them could see the animal there, she sprang into the thicket, passing to the opposite side.

On the margin of the cedars, partly in and partly out, lay Rocky Mountain Al.

She saw him as he lay—saw blood upon his temple, and then her fair face became contorted with anguish and a thirst for revenge.

At the same moment voices sounded from the bank above, and Nugget Nell jerked her revolvers, with a look of fury in her eyes.

"I tole yer I'd fetch ther cuss, Bill, but I'm dang'd put out 'bout his critter gitting off, fer ther bag o' gold mought be tied ter his saddle."

These were the words that Nell heard, followed by more in another voice, as two men made their way down the bank with difficulty.

"I don't reckon, pard, he'd risk his dust thet-a-ways, but hit don't much matter. He's gut a heap o' greenbacks in his pouch. He bored Bill an' shot Bud so bad he'll never flip another keerd, 'sides layin' out ther Terrantaler, an' I'd like ter tortur' him fer thet. Both ther paste-board-slingers war o' great sarvice ter ther band, being in ther burg, whar they c'u'd gi'n Captain Dan infern-ashe. Thar's ther cuss laid out cold, pard. Dang my skin, ef yer didn't make a far-stretch shot count thet time, sure an' sartin!"

"Thar he lays, for a fac'," said the other, "an' ef he hain't passed his checks I'll knife him!"

The two assassins, evidently belonging to the Pumas, for they wore black masks, had now reached the vicinity of the cedars, and as the last speaker ended he drew his knife and was within three paces of the prostrate, perhaps dead man, when, clear as a bell, from the thicket, rung the voice of Nugget Nell:

"Say your prayers, you cowardly curs, for your crimes and your days are at an end!"

Never were men more amazed and terrified.

Both turned pale as death, and strove to beg for life, but only a gasping sound came from their throats, for too well they knew, by the voice that appalled them, that they were doomed.

Becoming desperate at length, both turned to fly, but two quick, sharp reports broke on the air, one close following the other, and with yells of agony the assassins fell to the earth in the spasms of death.

Nugget Nell still kept her position on the defensive, expecting others of the outlaw band to make their appearance on the verge of the bank above, but, as moments passed, she decided that the reports of her revolvers had not been heard, and she quickly stepped out of the cedars.

Going up to the side of Rocky Mountain Al, she placed her hand upon his breast and felt his pulse, her face showing great relief, especially when, after inspection, she perceived that the bullet of the bandit had made but a scalp wound, striking the skull with force enough, however, to stun him.

Just as Nell had ascertained this much she heard the approach of men coming at a run down the wash-out, and she parted the branches on that side of the thicket.

Two young men were coming toward the cedars in a rapid run, and one of these Nell recognized as the original of one of the photographs shown her by Nellie Belzer—none other than the lover for whom the latter was in search, Herbert Ives!

For an instant only was the face of Nugget Nell thrust out from the cedar branches, and plainly revealed by the bright moonlight, for she drew back quickly, thinking it would not be policy to reveal herself at this time to Ives.

She saw Herbert sink to the bed of the gulch, evidently overcome by the sight of a face so marvelously like that of his sweetheart, whom he supposed two thousand miles away; he probably thinking, and with good reason, that he beheld a supernatural vision—that the fair girl he so much loved was dead, and that it was her spirit that now appeared before him.

Hastily climbing a cedar in the middle of the thicket Nugget Nell awaited developments.

George Belzer was in advance of Herbert,

and consequently did not witness the halt of the latter, but rushed onward, his gaze bent upon the bank above, which fact also prevented him from observing Nell as she thrust her head from the cedars.

George discovered the dead bandits as soon as he reached the thicket; and, with an ejaculation of horror, drew his other revolver, and stood, with one of these weapons in either hand, expecting each instant that enemies would spring upon him from the cedar shades.

No sound, however, came to his ears to indicate the presence of anything but death in the lonely wash-out; and, greatly surprised at the absence of Herbert, he turned about, and discovered his pard, seated upon the bed of the deep gully, with both hands pressed upon his brow and over his eyes, as if to shut out a horrible view.

"What, in the name of common sense, is the row with you, Herb?" he exclaimed, with a show of indignation. "Is that the way you stick to a pard, in a tight place? I might have been jumped by a dozen bandits or Indians, and no one to stand by me."

"There has been a lively fight here, for I can see two stiffs, both with black masks on their faces. But, come on, Herb! I'm surprised at you. We must investigate the affair."

"Say, have you got the heart-disease, or a sudden attack of the colic? Or have you made a discovery of 'pay dirt' in the sand there?"

The cool indifference of George Belzer, and his announcement that two dead men lay near the thicket, caused Herbert Ives to get up, and advance toward his pard, saying as he did so:

"George Belzer, do you mean to assert, as your manner would indicate, that you have seen nothing to startle and horrify you?"

"Well, Herb, I will confess that I was at first set back a little, at sight of these two corpses; for I thought, at first glance, that they were laying for us, ready to blaze with their sixes."

"They're a horrid sight, sure enough; but I didn't refer to them. Did you see nothing strange in the outer branches of the cedars, just there?"

And Herbert pointed out the place where Nell's head had been seen by him for a moment.

"I wasn't looking there," said George. "If you saw a living human gazing from the thicket, say so at once, and we will dash in; for it is foolish to expose ourselves in this manner."

"I saw what I do not believe to be a living being. Don't laugh, George! You know me well enough as the last boy in the world to be carried away with anything superstitious."

"I'm as free from that weakness as any man living, I really believe; but, as sure as I am speaking to you, I saw the face of Nellie Belzer between those cedar branches, as plainly outlined as I ever saw it. Now, what have you to say in explanation?"

So earnestly were these words of Herbert Ives spoken, his face pale, and his voice husky, that George, without a word in reply, dashed off, and into the cedar thicket. Herbert followed him, and both searched every nook, but failed to discover any thing; Nugget Nell having removed her horse to another clump of cedars.

"Herb, you have seen her," he exclaimed, his friend. "You know, and having been talking about Nellie, and thinking of her, and all that, you thought you saw her."

"It was but a mind picture, old boy; so don't say anything more about it. Hello! what's this? Another dead man, as I'm a sinner! There's been quite a shooting pic-nic here."

"Herb, this is a scout, as I'm alive! and a confoundedly good-looking fellow at that! Stop! he's alive. I see how it was. He shot those two maskers, but a glance bullet knocked him out on the fly. He's no infant, but I reckon we can get him into camp."

"He's a prince in buckskin," said Herbert, admiringly. "But hadn't I better bring one of the horses?"

"A good idea, Herb! Run as fast as you can, and lead Charley's nag, as it is the smallest. He shows no sign of returning consciousness."

Herb rushed off up the wash-out, soon returning, at a gallop, on Charley's Spanish pony.

Rocky Mountain Al was lifted to the saddle, and one on each side supporting the still senseless scout, the two young men urged the horse up the wash-out to the gorge, soon reaching the camp. There they laid the stranger upon a blanket, and bathed his head with cool spring water. This treatment, in a short time caused Al to open his eyes in bewilderment.

At this moment, a prolonged unearthly yell came sounding afar up the broken cliff-side, and the astonished listeners gazed upward.

The sight that met their view was soul-harrowing.

A hideous Apache warrior stood upon a narrow projection of the rock wall of the cliff, holding over the dizzy height a human form, the limbs of which were bound, and the face stamped with horror.

"Oh, Herb, George, good-by! Tell father I'm sorry I left him. Go back home. Good-by!"

The last words were hardly distinguishable,

seeming smothered by agony and terror at sight of the dreadful abyss, over which the captive hung.

For an instant Herbert Ives stood still, his eyes fixed and glassy; fixed upon his little brother, while his very soul seemed pierced through and through. His heart ceased pulsation, and his brain became like molten lead.

Then his form reeled to and fro, and he fell to the earth—fell, as if a bullet had torn through his vitals.

With a heavy, heart-rending groan, George Belzer sunk to a sitting posture, gazing in a dazed manner upward at his little pard Charley Ives, now close clutched by the red-handed Apache, and suspended a hundred feet over the rough base of the cliff!

Rocky Mountain Al now staggered to his feet, also gazing up at the terrible tableau; at first as in a dream. He then slowly began to realize the true state of affairs; and a look of the most intense hate and vengeful fury came into his face, as he recognized the one surviving brave of the war-party that had escaped him at the "open," down the range.

But soon the face of the scout changed in expression; relief, joy, and exultation showed plainly, as he said to George Belzer, in a quick and commanding tone:

"Not a word, or a motion, as you value that boy's life. If you see anything that changes your dread to relief and joy, don't suck in an extra amount of oxygen, to cause a flicker of your nerves. Squat as still as if you were chained to the ground, for the scene is about to change, and that youngster's life hangs by a hair!"

The admonitions of Rocky Mountain Al, were, however, uncalled for; as George Belzer sat silent, and as if transformed into stone.

CHAPTER XV.

THE RESCUE.

THE lively "pic-nic" in Pilgrim's Palace did not last long, after the sudden and unaccountable disappearing of Rocky Mountain Al.

Soon a score of brawny miners stood masters of the field, and the bar-room floor was almost covered by prostrate forms of dead and dying.

Tom Mathews, with a sigh of relief, thrust his revolver beneath the counter, and cried out:

"Step up, pilgrims, and irrigate! I should judge you who've swept the board clean, and opened a mourner's party, might be a leetle thirsty. Come! it's my 'set 'em up' to all that can stand up."

The effect of these words was almost magical.

It was a hard looking crowd that responded, and, while they were drinking, the "Terrantaler o' Taos," on hands and knees, crawled out, and around the corner of Pilgrim's Palace into a thicket of cedars.

His head was badly bruised and bleeding, from the terrible blow he received when Al had thrown the bag of dollars; and the trampling he had been subjected to, beneath the feet of the mob of crazed humans, had put his anatomy generally in pretty much the same condition.

He had not been in the thicket long, when the "Terrantaler o' Taos," and one of the "pilgrims" were brought out, and laid side by side on the grass, six in all, including Al and Dad, the ill-starred monte dealers.

Then the door closed, and the Terrantaler was left alone with the ghastly dead. Evidently he did not enjoy the situation, for he crept away among the cedars, indulging, as he did so, in a cautious soliloquy:

"Dog-goned ef I ain't the luckiest cuss, up er down ther range! Ther's pilgrims laid out es stiff es wagon-tongues, an' ready fer plantin' that didn't shoot off their tongues fer nothin'. Jist made blamed idgits o' themselves tryin' ter snatch a dollar er two ter git bug juice. But I'm most dang'dly bamboozled 'bout thet gal—ef I ain't, I hopes ter be chawed by ther first griz' I runs ag'in'!"

"They said, down at Santa Fe, when they bargained wi' me ter kerral her, thet she war mild es a baby; but dang'd ef she ain't chuck full o' chain lightning!"

"She's a high flyer, an' she stud her ground wi' her sticker, ready fer me, without a flicker in her peepers. Howsomever, I'm a-gamblin' she's my game yit, an' I'll scoop thet thousand dollars."

Major Belzer hes gut ter wilt afore ther terrific gaze o' ther Terrantaler o' Taos, what ain't lost a leg yit, though ther hull o' New Mex' population hed a fandango on his 'natermy."

"I'm es sore an' stiff es if I'd been rolled from ther top o' Pike's Peak clean ter Rayton Pass; an' my scalp 'ud make a 'Pache cuss, ef one o' them gut ther deadwood on me, hit's mashed up an' tored so 'tarnal bad!"

"I doesn't reckon I kin play a lone han' in Chico City; ther burg air a hot place, an' ther citz air a leetle on ther high fly, an' too brash fer ther Terrantaler. An' thet's thet cuss what slung ther dollars! Wonder who in thunderation he air?"

"Ef I hed gut a good, fa'r sight et his make-up, an' ther pictur' part o' his 'natermy, I mought recog him an' lay fer him. Dang'd ef

Chico hain't gut ter suffer fer trompin' on a peaceable cit o' New Mex'."

"I'm hyer till yit, wi' my butes on, an' my shooters an' sticker. I'm a roarer, I am! I'm a ragin' skylone, but I hain't gut steam up."

"Wisht I hed a bar'l o' liniment or snake-ile ter rub onter myself, an' a bar'l o' bug-juice ter errigate my in'ards. Then I'd be hunk, an' would slash through O. K. Less see; whar'd I leave my critter? Reckon I'd better levant afore I'm jumped ag'in. I'll skute up ther range a piece, hunt a soft spot 'tween two bowlders, an' repose my 'Pollo-like 'natermy until things calms down."

"Talkin' 'bout bowlders 'minds me o' Doubloon Dan, ther Cap o' ther Pumas. I must pard with him in this biz, fer thar ain't no show fer me ef I've gut ter buck ag'in' ther hull o' New Mex' an' Colorado."

"Ya-as, that's 'bout the p'ogramme. I'll pard wi' Doubloon Dan, fer he's gut a heap o' back-ers."

Thus bringing his soliloquy to an end, the "Terrantaler o' Taos" slowly and with difficulty drew himself to a perpendicular, several deep groans of pain bursting from his lips, caused by his many bruises and stiffened joints.

He then staggered out from the thicket, and proceeded up in the rear of the shanties, soon entering another clump of cedars, where he found his horse.

Clambering into his saddle with not a little difficulty, he urged the animal up the range north, following, in course of time, the wash-out that led to the mountain gorge, both of which had during the night been the scene of tragic events, unknown and undreamed of by the redoubtable Tarantula.

The burly ruffian halted on the east side of the thicket, from which George Belzer and Herbert Ives had a moment or so previous borne the senseless form of Rocky Mountain Al.

Slipping from his horse, the "Terrantaler" led the animal within the cedars, where he secured it to a tree. He then proceeded to search for a soft spot upon which he could sleep through the remainder of the night. As he passed around the interior of the thicket he naturally glanced out of it here and there, and as it happened, in so doing discovered the two dead bandits who had been shot by Nugget Nell. This threw him into a fit of superstitious horror.

"Dang my cast-iron heart!" he muttered, in surprise and dread. "What sort o' doin's hes bin goin' on hyer-aways? Thar's dead humans scattered permisc'us-like up an' down ther range!"

"Howsomever, mebbe so they ain't defuncted yit. I'll 'zamine 'em, fer they're some o' Doubloon Dan's boyees, sure es shutin'. I doesn't keer ter lay my paws on a corpus, but I reckon I'll hev ter do hit. I c'u'dn't close my peepers wi' them layin' roun' this-a-way, I'm dead sure on it!"

Approaching the slain, the Tarantula bent and examined the bodies, shoving up the masks as he did so.

Nugget Nell was still up in the cedar-tree; she having observed the approach of the ruffian who had been slapped in the face by her at Pilgrim's Palace.

When the cowardly braggart passed out of the thicket, Nell descended the tree, and attaching a rope, which she took from the cantle of the ruffian's saddle, around the fetlock of his horse, she secured its opposite end to the trunk of a cedar on the outer edge of the grove. This done, she silently ascended the tree again; the Tarantula, a moment after, entering the clump of cedars, with the intention of riding on to the range, where he could find a place in which he could sleep without having dead men lying around loose in his vicinity.

Climbing into his saddle, he urged his animal out from the shades; but, at this moment, Nugget Nell gave out a series of moans and howls, which caused the very hairs of the gigantic border "hero" to stand on end, and the marrow in his bones to chill.

The Tarantula drove both spurs deep into the flanks of his horse, and the animal sprang frantically forward over the bed of the wash-out, being suddenly brought up by the rope around its hind leg, which caused the beast to fall prone upon the sands, its rider being hurled violently over its head.

At this moment another series of groans broke out upon the night air; and, with features stamped with terror—knowing well that the masked men were dead, but believing their ghosts were in the thicket—the big borderer, repudiating the pain of wounds and bruises, sprang to his feet, and ran madly up the wash-out toward the range; the shrieking peals of laughter from Nugget Nell, who could hardly retain her hold on the tree from merriment, causing him to double his exertions to place as much space as possible between himself and the haunted grove.

On ran the "Terrantaler o' Taos" as he had never run before, the sand flying behind him as if a small whirlwind was coming up along the bed of the wash-out. At length he reached the gulch, up which he sped, at times gazing with horror over his shoulder, as if expecting to see the two masked corpses coming in hot pursuit.

On he dashed, until, turning a bend, he was suddenly brought to a halt, and made to dart behind a spur of rock, by a more amazing sight than he had yet witnessed.

In front of him, at the head of the gulch, where he had no idea that a sign of animal life could be, and where he had intended to crawl into some hole, and study over the strange and appalling groans and laughter by which he had been so terrified—there, high up, at least a hundred feet on the cliff side, was an Apache brave, holding over the dizzy height a white youth, who appeared to be bound hand and foot; and around a rough break in the creek, where it was impossible for the Indian to see him, although quite near to the latter, was a scout, clad in buckskin breeches, woolen shirt, and sombrero—he being in the act of removing his boots when the Tarantula caught sight of him.

The object of this scout was quite apparent, but it was one which seemed impossible of accomplishment.

The Apache was on a narrow ledge, not more than two feet between the outer edge and the perpendicular wall at his back, a fact that was easily estimated by the movements of the Indian, as he braced himself against the wall and laid the youth at his feet, that he might rest his arms and prolong the torture and terrible strain upon the brains of the agonized witnesses at the foot of the cliff.

The terror-stricken giant was dumfounded; for in the bed, and at the very head of the gulch, was a man standing upright, one seated, and still another outstretched upon the ground.

"Dog-gone my iron heart!" muttered the Tarantula, "thar's more ding-dong inter hitter night than I ever see'd afore, an' my bleed air turned inter ice-water—dog'd ef hit ain't!"

"Hell air let loose in New Mex', an' a boss circuss seems ter be started 'bout every five minits. Ef thar ain't ther dang'dest, mos' brain-scaryin' sight I ever see'd, I'll chaw my own head off an' spit hit clean over ther range."

"What's a-comin' nex', I wonder? Ther Angel Gabri'l, I reckon, with a double-bar'l'd blow-horn an' a sky-clone ahind ter furnish ther breath ter keep ther music up!"

At this moment the scout was seen stealthily to make his way to the corner of the spur of rock, a bowie-blade gleaming in the bright moonlight, the handle of it closely clutched in his right hand.

Raising himself erect, and straight as a forest pine, the Apache filled his lungs and shot out the blood-curdling war-cry of his tribe in vengeful exultation. All knew that this was the prelude to some horrible act of revenge, which could be naught else than the hurling of the helpless boy from the dizzy height to be mangled into a shapeless mass at the very feet of those who would gladly have risked their lives to save him.

At this very instant, however, and while yet the fearful war-cry was filling the night air, the right arm of the stranger scout was quickly drawn backward, and then shot forward, hurling with electric velocity the glittering bowie-knife, which flew like an arrow, the point of the blade being buried in the temple of the hideous Apache brave.

No sooner had it left the hand of the scout than he sprung forward along the ledge, with such speed as to endanger his life, and clutched the leg of the youth, who was securely bound, just as the terribly contorting warrior, with his arms beating the air wildly, sunk downward, even when death-stricken, and the horrid death-rattle in his throat, striving in his fall to take his captive with him over the dizzy height!

As the Indian dropped upon the youth, causing the latter to slide partly over the shelf, the watchers below covered their eyes with their hands, they being unable to see the prostrate scout, who, grasping a leg of Charley Ives with one hand, hurled the brave from the rocky shelf with the other. At the next instant he jerked Charley to his feet, and standing up, holding him safely with both hands, he gave a yell of triumph as the warrior shot downward.

Rocky Mountain Al and George Belzer heard the sickening sound occasioned by the Apache striking on the jagged rocks at the base of the cliff near them; but the yell of exultation given by the scout, told them that Charley was saved.

Looking upward, they saw the striking tableau, which brought unbounded joy and relief to their hearts.

George rushed to Herbert, and threw a large cup full of water in his face, and soon saw him gasp, and with long-drawn sighs open his eyes, that were now almost expressionless.

"Jump to your feet, Herb!" yelled George Belzer, in a joyous tone. "Jump to your feet, and look up the cliff! Charley is saved. Little Pard is all right!"

"Hurra-a-h for Broncho Jim!"

Thus yelled Rocky Mountain Al.

All this was seen and heard by the "Terrantaler o' Taos," who had almost forgotten his recent fright. But, as the loud cry of the scout echoed through the gulch, it was followed by the same howls, and groans, and laughter, that had frightened the burly dastard in the thicket. With renewed horror, terror and dread, all blended, he now dashed around the spur of

rock, and toward the head of the gulch, bounding into the cedars near the spot where stood George, Herbert and Al.

Here he fell prostrate and panting, unable to articulate a word; the "ding-dong of his iron heart" being plainly heard by George Belzer, who bent over him in amazement.

CHAPTER XVI.

MISTAKEN IDENTITY.

"How-dy, pard Al? Struck yer trail down range, an' come arter yer on ther run."

Thus called out the scout on the cliff, after severing the bonds that held the wrists and ankles of the boy Charley, who now stood, pale and trembling, by his side, hardly daring to look down from the fearful height.

Broncho Jim had now a difficult task before him.

Had he been alone, the feat would not have been hard to accomplish, for he had clambered over the range for years, hunting big-horns and grizzlies. But incumbered by this now helpless youth in the descent made it far less easy for him.

Placing a hand under each arm of the boy, he gently pushed him ahead, supporting his trembling form.

Gaining the spur of rock whence he had cast his bowie, he strapped his rifle upon his back, and began the perilous descent. But he had not proceeded far before Herbert, from the branches of the tallest cedar, had caught hold of his little brother.

Lowering the youth into the outstretched arms of Rocky Mountain, Herbert quickly descended to make room for Broncho Jim, who sprung from the narrow shelf into the tree: the same route taken by the Apache, when he bore his youthful captive up the mountain.

George and Herbert sprung out from the cedars, and clasped the hands of Charley, Al delivering the rescued boy to his brother.

As Broncho Jim bounded from the thicket, Al grasped his hand and led him to his new-found friends.

"Young gentlemen," he said, "this is Broncho Jim, my pard on the plains and mountains. As to his character I need not speak. You have witnessed an act of his that proves him as white and brave a man as ever jumped a chasm, slung a sticker, or pulled a trigger."

Herb and George wrung his hands, while Charley laid his hand in that of the strange scout, saying:

"Broncho Jim, I am but a boy, but my heart is big as a man's to hold gratitude. Charley Ives will always remember you and the time may come when I shall be able to show that I mean more than any words can express."

The scout patted Charley on the shoulder, and said, with a careless tone and manner:

"What does yer take me fer, leetle pard? Does yer s'pose I'd stan' an' see a cussed greasy 'Pache sling yer ter kingdom come, without makin' a break ter resky yer, an' sen' ther red heathen on ther fly ter t'other side ther moon? I reckon not! Hit wouldn't be Broncho Jim ef I did. But, whar's my bowie? I wouldn't lose her fer a couple o' doubloons."

Walking quickly to the mangled corpse of the Indian, the scout recovered his knife, wiped it on the grass, scalped the Apache, and then returned it to its sheath.

The fire was now replenished, and Charley was wrapped in a blanket and laid near it, George Belzer pulling a quantity of long dried grass from under the cedars to form a soft couch for the youth.

"Gentlemen," said Al, who was now preparing some coffee and dried beef for his pard Broncho Jim, "I haven't found time to thank you for your kindness to myself. I was in chase of a certain person, when I was shot by a concealed assassin."

"Perhaps you can explain to me something in regard to the condition of affairs, when you found me. I am known as Rocky Mountain Al; but better on the west side of the range than here."

"We heard shots down in the foot-hills, as we were staking our horses," explained George; "and, rushing down the wash-out that leads to the gulch we discovered two dead men near a thicket. Both had masks upon their faces. Searching further, we found you."

"Herb ran to fetch Charley's pony, and supporting you upon it, we came back to our camp, where we had left Charley asleep. While endeavoring to bring you back to consciousness, what was our amazement to hear a terrible yell above us! But you know the rest."

"I am certainly pleased to meet you, Rocky Mountain Al. I heard much of you, when we were in Texas, from Joe Booth, better known as 'Reckless Joe,' who is a celebrated character in the Lone Star State."

While George Belzer was speaking, Broncho Jim had gone into the thicket, and with the aid of a torch, was examining the face and make-up of the Tarantula, who had fallen asleep, prostrated by deep potations; but, when George spoke of their having seen the two dead bandits, Al sprung to his feet in astonishment.

"Were these men shot or cut?" he asked, quickly.

"Both shot through the heart," was the reply.

"As sure as I am alive," said Al, after a moment's reflection, "those men men were shot by Nugget Nell."

"I was doing my best to overtake her, when they were probably lying in wait for me. A bullet from one of them struck me on the side of my head. It was a close shave. I was riding at full gallop, at the time."

"We found you in the bed of the wash-out," said George. "You must have fallen from your horse."

"That is about the way of it," said Al. "I broke a bank at Pilgrim's Palace, in Chico City, last evening, and was obliged to shoot one of the monte men. The place was full of bummers. The monte men were both of them crooked, and I have been on their trail, for some bad business of theirs at Tucson, a year ago."

"They were connected with the Pumas, a band of road-agents, led by Doubloon Dan; but I have had a difficult time getting dead straight proof against them."

"After that, I saw that big ruffian, who lies asleep in the cedars, there—and it is a mystery to me how he came out of the scrape alive—about to engage in a knife duel, in the bar-room, with one whom I supposed to be a youth; but whom I soon recognized as one of whom I was in search. I knocked the giant down, but the supposed youth disappeared."

"Then followed a terrible *melee*. I asked the barkeeper who the young man was, and he told me it was a girl, known as Nugget Nell. The name impressed me, as much as the resemblance of the face to a photograph that had been shown me. It is the picture of a girl that I am sworn to find. As fast as possible, I jumped my horse, and getting sight of her, on the stage trail, put spurs, and gave chase."

"Some of the bandits, who must have been in the bar-room, in disguise, had seen me, and taking a short cut laid for me. But I am determined to find the girl, if I have to search the range to the North Park."

"Boys, if I am not mistaken, you are interested in the same business. Are not your names Herbert Ives and George Belzer?"

The surprise of the two young men was great, but George made answer at once:

"You have our names correct; but how, in the name of wonder, did you obtain knowledge of use?"

As he spoke, Broncho Jim approached from the cedars.

"Hold a moment, gentlemen," said Al, "and I will explain." Then, turning to his pard he added:

"Jim, your lunch is ready. What do you make of that burly bummer, who ran in on us so strangely? Is he crazy, think you, or drunk?"

"Thet cuss air ther pilgrim what calls hisself ther 'Terrantaler o' Taos,'" answered Broncho Jim. "He's a bad cutes yer'll run ag'in 'tween hyer an' ther Rio Gran-dee."

"I reckon he's got snakes in his boots," suggested Al.

"We'll 'tend ter him in ther mornin'," said Broncho Jim, as he squatted by the fire, and attacked his beef and coffee.

"Now, gents," said Al, "I'll explain everything. Down the range, I was on the trail of some Apaches, and got scooped in. They had me tied to a stake for torture, when an old man who seemed on the verge of insanity, from anxiety of mind and privation, rode up the gulch, diverting the attention of the Indians. I broke loose, caught up my Winchester, and between us we killed all who were in the gulch. We then went further up the range, where we had another knife pic-nic with skulkers from the same party. This red, who captured our little pard just now, was the last of the layout."

"Well, the old man was none other than Major George Belzer, who was in search of his daughter, Miss Nellie Belzer, who, herself, has come West in search of her lover, one Herbert Ives. Now, you see that I am posted, I reckon!"

Herbert was silent from astonishment.

"Will some one give me a bat on the head?" said George. "I believe I'm dreaming, or that Rocky Mountain Al is no less than his Satanic Majesty himself!"

Al burst into a roar of laughter.

"We haven't time to converse much on this subject," he said; "but I have something further to say."

"I left Major Belzer, ill in San Miguel, but he is in good hands, and I came up the range in search of his daughter. I have seen her picture, and believe me or not, the young lady who is known as Nugget Nell is none other than Miss Nellie Belzer!"

The scout now detailed the facts, as they appeared to him.

Never were men more surprised, and filled with deep anguish and concern, than were his listeners.

Herbert paced up and down the sands, with quick and nervous step, overwhelmed by the knowledge that his Nellie had, in so short a time, become such a notorious character, going about dressed in male attire.

He knew now that he had seen the face of his betrothed in the cedar thicket, and that it was indeed a living face.

Nellie had seen him, but had been ashamed to meet him. Words are inadequate to express the agony of the young man. George, also, was greatly pained, although he felt relieved to know that his uncle was safe.

"If Nugget Nell is my cousin Nellie Belzer," he said firmly and decidedly, "she is not responsible for her actions. She has lost her mind and judgment through the protracted ill usage she has received at the hands of Lucretia Lane. She is disguised, in order that she may pursue her search with a better chance of success. I am fully convinced of that."

"That must be it," said Herbert, at length, "but I scarce know what to think. I trust that all will be well."

"Let me think—let me study this matter. It has completely dazed and bewildered me, and I feel myself incapable of sensible reasoning at present."

"I am sure none of us will ever forget this night's experience. George please see that Charley has everything that he needs. Poor boy, I must not neglect him; he has suffered enough already."

As Herbert finished these remarks, Broncho Jim rushed from the cedars, shouting:

"Thet cantankerous cuss, ther Terrantaler o' Taos, hes levanted, skipped, 'sloped, glided clean away; dog'd ef he hain't!"

CHAPTER XVII.

DOUBLOON DAN.

THE camp-fire in the gulch was kindled at the very base of the cliff, between the clump of cedars and the spring; consequently, as the little party sat around it, they were prevented from having a view down the gulch.

The "Terrantaler o' Taos" rushed in affright up the gulch, his brain having been demoralized by liquor, and weakened since he left Pilgrim's Palace, for want of stimulants, causing him to be startled at the slightest sound.

He well knew that the scouts were aware of his character, and had been the means of driving him out of several towns down country; and should they recognize him now, which they doubtless would, they would probably string him up a limb, without a trial—the lonely gulch being favorable to such a proceeding.

The sight of the scouts, when he awoke, sobered him in a measure, and he instantly formed a plan, which he successfully carried out.

Rushing into the thicket, he fell down upon the dead leaves, and feigned a deep, drunken slumber, which deceived, as we have seen, even Broncho Jim.

After Jim left the cedars the Tarantula peeped out from the branches, and, seeing the coast clear, crawled out on the opposite end of the thicket, near the cliff base, and quickly made his way down the gulch, to the spur of rock, from which he had first caught a view of the camp.

Here, concealed from view, but peeping around the rock, the ruffian shook his clinched fist up the gorge, saying:

"Dog-gone ther bull o' yer! My iron heart's bin kep' on ther double ding-dong ever since I struck Chico City; an' now I'm a-goin' ter hump myself, an' light plum inter biz. I hes gut some infermashe outen yer, when yer thought I war dead inter the middle o' a see-ester. Whoop-er-ee! I'm a roarer!"

"I'm chain lightnin', an' sot hit down in yer memorander in 'delerble ink! I'm er border hero. I'm ther Terrantaler o' Taos, an' my touch air death. Whoop-er up! Whoop-er-ee-ee!"

After thus delivering his little piece, being careful in regard to raising his voice to such a pitch as to be overheard in the camp, the giant whirled and dashed down the gulch, and then on, following the wash-out to the spot where he had been thrown from his horse.

To his great joy, the animal stood in nearly the same place where it had fallen; and, approaching the beast, he discovered the lariat tied to its hind leg.

Giving out a whistle of surprise, at the same time berating himself for "a ormighty ole bamboozled fool," he detached the rope, pondering in regard to who had played him the trick; at last deciding, from the disclosure of Al, to which he had listened attentively, that it could be no other than Nugget Nell.

Mounting his horse, the border "hero" was about to spur down the wash-out when a half-score of horsemen, wearing black masks, galloped up to the bank above from the timber at the base of the mountain, and leveled their revolvers at him; the two dead "agents" lying plain in view of their living confederates, thus causing the "Terrantaler" to be placed in a suspicious position.

"Throw up your hands, or you're a stiff pilgrim!"

This order fell on the ears of the giant, and filled him for a moment with terror; but knowing that an explanation would set him all right, and seeing a good opportunity to air the brava-

do, which was a second nature to him but which he could not back up, he yelled:

"Up paws hit air, pards; yer hes me foul, but I'm a-protestin' ag'in' sich proceedin's. Dang my iron heart ef I hain't kep' chuck full o' biz ter-night!"

"Boyees, ef Doubloon Dan air wi' yer, I'm ther peregrinatin' pilgrim what's gut a heap o' solid simon-pure 'Nited States lingo ter spit at him; an' thar ain't no time fer perlimernary roun'-ther-bush perlaverin'."

"I'll jump my critter, an' glide up at yer, ef so be hit won't break up yer p'ogramme. I'm ther Terrantaler o' Taos, an' I'm sp'ilin' ter string somebody bad. Whoop-er up! Whoop-er-ee-ee! Set me down Al, superfine XXX!"

"Tumble up here lively, and no more of your loose gab!"

Thus ordered one of the bandits, in a voice of command that was impatiently delivered.

It was with no little difficulty that the giant surmounted the steep bank, as his bruises gave him great pain.

His appearance, all blood-stained as he was, and with glaring and swollen eyes, was little short of terrible.

"Dog-gone my cast-iron heart! I'm es sore an' stiff, an' gin'rally broke up, es I sh'u'd feel ef I'd bin claw'd, an' chaw'd, an' spit out by forty griz' b'ars!"

"Which on yer's Doubloon Dan? I'm a-feelin' jist terrific, I am! I'm high-fly ter night, an' my iron heart's on ther double ding-dong!"

"If you don't hobble your infernal tongue, the 'ding-dong' will come to a sudden stop," said one of the masked night-riders, urging his horse close up to the burly scoundrel, as he spoke.

"What do you want with Doubloon Dan? Spit it out lively, or say your prayers!"

"Don't be so cussed cross-grained," said the Tarantula; "I'm a-spokin' ter ther p'int when I gits started. Thar lays a couple o' yer boyees, what laid fer Rocky Mountain Al, arter he broke ther bank in Pilgrim's Palace. They made him claw dirt, but he's right side up wi' care, now. Nugget Nell 'roved, an' she bored 'em both. Thar's some tender-huffs up ther gorge, an' they tuck the scout up ter thar camp, and foteched him roun'."

"Broncho Jim air with 'em, an' I perceeded up thet-a-way, 'tendin' ter clean out ther hull outfit, when a skulkin' 'Pache spy lit onter me, an' blocked my leetle game."

"Howsomever, I sp'iled ther red fer futur' fightin', but I gut mashed right smart rollin' down ther range, wi' ther cuss a-clutchin' me. Yer kin clean 'em out easy, ef yer keers; though I don't reckon yer d git a hefty 'mount o' plunder."

"Thet ain't what I war wantin' ter 'splain, though. I've gut a job o' kerralin' a ole man what's in San Miguel, an' a gal—this hyer Nugget Nell—an' I wants help. Thar's a thousan' dollars fer each, an' I'll go halves wi' yer; 'sides we-'uns kin bleed ther parties what wants 'em arterwards."

"They is comin' on ter Chico from Santa Fe; an', come ter numerate, hit 'ud be a mighty good ijee ter kerral ther hearse, an' bleed 'em on the trail, fer they is 'ristocratic States folks, an' kin sen' fer more wealth arter they 'roves in Chico."

"Now, ef thar ain't a heap o' boss payin' biz, shook out wi' little lingo, in a few fleetin' periods, I'm a-feedin on prickly pears fer ther nex' six moons."

"How does yer like ther way ther Terrantaler pans out? Whoop-er up! Whoop-er-ee-ee!"

"I'm es dry es ef I'd chawed gypsum an' alkali fer grub ther las' four weeks. Ef any on yer hes gut a smell o' bug-juice, sift her out, an' I'll plank a dollar a swaller!"

"Pass him your canteen, Antonio," said the man to whom the Tarantula had been confiding his secrets.

The giant grasped the vessel with trembling hands, and glued the muzzle to his lips with insane satisfaction, taking a deep draught. Then, heaving a deep sigh of relief, he asked:

"Air yer Doubloon Dan, dead sure?"

"I am so called; and I know enough of your story to be convinced that the remainder of it is true. Go down now and mount your horse, follow the wash-out until the animal can reach the bank, and then join us."

Turning to his men, as the Tarantula slid down the bank, he added:

"Four of you, to the right of the line, dismount, and bring up Clark and Jackson. They must have been drunk to have allowed a girl to get the best of them."

"As to attacking the camp up the gorge, it would be fatal to some of us, for these scouts shoot to kill, and they are chuck full of sand. Besides, it would be gaining but little, for Rocky Mountain Al would secrete his gold at the first alarm, where we could not find it."

The dead bandits were brought up the bank, but not without much difficulty, and hidden in a dense thicket in the rear of the band, the Tarantula arriving among the outlaws soon after.

Doubloon Dan was puzzled—extremely so. He had seen Nugget Nell often, when he had

been in Chico City in disguise, and he was at a loss to know why she had been, as he believed, in female attire, in the coach that he had wrecked upon the creek. All this, and above all, her fainting when the stage was overturned, was very strange to him, knowing as he did her fearless and daring nature.

Why the Santa Fe parties wanted her was also a puzzle, unless, indeed, she was an heiress in the States, and her "removal" would benefit those who were in search of her.

He had seen Nell in the mountains since the robbery of the coach, and had asked her why she had been in it, but she merely laughed at him.

Nugget Nell was a character whose daring acts had won Captain Dan's admiration; and he resolved that, notwithstanding her having shot his two men, he would, in place of capturing her for the parties Tarantula had mentioned as being in Santa Fe, he would capture them. He would stop the "hearse," and take them from it to his secret retreat. They must have abundance of money to be able to offer such rewards.

Nell should have them in her power, if she wished, and unravel the mystery for herself.

In the first place, however, his men must be made to think that their two comrades had been killed by some other parties, otherwise Nugget Nell would be in danger of her life.

"There is one part of your story that I don't believe," he said to the giant. "It is too thin, as all of my men can see."

"What part air thet?" asked the Tarantula quickly, and with a show of anger.

"In regard to the shooting," was the reply. "Nugget Nell did not shoot those boys. It must have been some of the party now camping up the gulch."

"I doesn't know dead sure," said the border ruffian, who was eager to play into Doubloon Dan's hand in anything that would insure the carrying out of his own plans; "bit mought ha' bin Rocky Mountain Al what sent 'em over ther range."

"That's about it, for we know Nell couldn't have done it had she been alone. But break into the brush, boys; we are exposing ourselves, and that without object."

The bandits whirled their horses, and were about to enter the bushes, when they heard the sound of clattering hoofs down the wash-out, from the direction of Chico City.

Turning their horses, Doubloon Dan and the Tarantula both dashed back to the position so recently occupied, and, to their surprise, saw Nugget Nell speeding up toward the gulch, having in lead, ready saddled and bridled, the black steed of Rocky Mountain Al.

"She's a r'arin', ragin' tornader when she lunges out," said the giant, "an' I wouldn't keer ter run ag'in' her. She's a-goin' up ther gulch wi' Rocky Mountain Al's stalyun."

The daring girl espied the two, and recognized the bandit chief by his form and bearing. Whirling her sombrero above her head in salutation, a merry laugh ringing out on the air, she turned a bend and disappeared up the wash-out.

"I'd give fifty thousand dollars for the love of that brave girl," said Doubloon Dan; "and she'll run me wild by her coldness and disdain!"

"Come on, Tarantula!" he exclaimed. "We'll break brush on that hearse to-morrow night and run chances in regard to our game from Santa Fe being on board."

Both men whirled their horses and spurred after the band, disappearing among the dense cedars at the foot of the range.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE CAPTURE.

WHEN Nugget Nell saw the Tarantula and his horse jerked to the earth, she felt sure that the giant would run into the camp of the young men who had conveyed Rocky Mountain Al toward the range.

The strange girl was now somewhat puzzled in regard to what should be her future movements.

She knew that Nellie Belzer would be wild with delight when informed that her lover was within two miles of Chico City; that the troubles of the fair wanderer would melt away upon meeting her betrothed, who would protect her and right her wrongs.

Nugget Nell had purposely sought a quarrel with the giant in Pilgrim's Palace, having recognized him from the description given by Nellie Belzer, in order to draw public resentment upon him, and force him from the town, through fears for his personal safety.

She had been greatly impressed by the splendid physique of the stranger scout, who had taken a hand in the game, and by the daring bravery in starting a "circus" on the first night of his arrival in a mining-town filled with desperate characters, and she was greatly amazed when she found he was pursuing her and calling her by name.

What he might wish of her was beyond her comprehension, as she had never spoken a word with him previous to this night.

When she heard the report of the rifle, fired by the bandit, and turning in her saddle, saw the handsome scout fall from his horse, her

heart sprung to her throat, for she knew that she had led him into danger, and perhaps to his death.

Much she now regretted not having halted and ascertained what he wished, and she could not account for her own perverseness in endeavoring to elude him, except that she had felt averse to meeting a man who was far superior to the average denizens of the mines, and she in male attire.

It was this that had caused her to fly from Pilgrim's Place, the moment the Tarantula struck the floor.

She had been half-crazed with exultation from the moment Nellie Belzer had shown her the photograph of the so-called Carl Cole; and, with the object of riding down her intense excitement, she had decided upon a gallop up the range—a most unlucky gallop for Rocky Mountain Al!

So she thought when the scout fell from his horse; and, at the risk of breaking her neck, she forced her steed down the bank into the wash-out, and then hastened to the side of the prostrate man. The incidents which followed have been already recorded.

While in the cedar branches, Nell had pondered much upon what course to take, in order to accomplish her long-sought revenge.

This man, who now called himself Carl Cole, but whom she knew to be Robert Rogers, had gained her maiden affections and induced her to fly from a happy home, and from kind and indulgent parents and friends, only to deceive and desert her shamefully.

This man she had sworn, a thousand times, when heart was wrung and tortured, should die by her hand; and now this oath was uppermost in her mind. Now, that she knew this dastard was married to another, to one who was leagued with him to defraud Nellie Belzer of fortune and happiness—now that she knew all this, she felt that Nellie and herself had a common interest in working out her future plans for revenge.

This Carl Cole, as he called himself, was coming to Chico City—was coming to his death; for Nugget Nell became more and more eager to kill her betrayer, as she thought of his being so near, and, perhaps, coming nearer that very night.

Until he did arrive, she decided that no stone should remain unturned to prevent any harm befalling Nellie Belzer; but she was undecided as to the policy of seeking a meeting with Herbert Ives until she had first communicated with Nellie.

However, when the terribly frightened Tarantula rushed frantically up the wash-out, Nugget Nell determined to follow him, and ascertain the whereabouts of the camp of the young men who had conveyed Rocky Mountain Al toward the range; for she was anxious to know if the scout had recovered.

She was curious, also, to know what would be the reception of the Tarantula, should he, in his fright, dash into the camp.

With this object, Nugget Nell descended from the cedar, and secreting her horse, hastened after the Tarantula, reaching the gulch, where, having traversed it for some distance, she discovered the burly ruffian peering around a spur of rock.

She felt positive that he was viewing the camp, and she decided herself to inspect it, and also to drive the Tarantula forward, thus placing him in the power of Rocky Mountain Al.

Thus resolved, she gave out a series of groans and unearthly howls, that caused the cowardly bully to rush in terror up the gulch, leaving Nell convulsed with laughter.

The strange girl at once ran to the position that had been occupied by the huge borderer, and stooping low to the earth, she gazed around the rocks, just as the man whom she had frightened sprung into the cedars alongside the camp.

To her great relief, Nell now saw Rocky Mountain Al standing erect near the thicket; but she was greatly surprised to see that one of the young men lay upon the ground, and another sat gazing upward, as did also the scout.

Casting her eyes in the same direction, Nell was appalled by the sight of the Apache holding a youth out over the dizzy height. Thus she stood, a witness of the horrible death of the Indian, and the rescue of Charley Ives.

When she perceived that the boy had been saved, Nugget Nell hastened down the gulch and wash-out, mounted her horse, and dashed at full speed for Chico City; discovering, on her way, the black horse of Rocky Mountain Al, which she easily caught, the animal running up to her side as she spoke kindly to him.

Lariatting the steed in a thicket, secure from observation, Nell hurried on, soon reaching the street of Chico City, which was deserted, although bright lights shone from the doors of Pilgrim's Palace and other bars, the Bug Juice Bazaar included.

Nell walked her horse to the rear of the shanties, and down to the outside stairway, which led to the room of Nellie Belzer. There securing the animal, she passed up the stairs, and tapped in a peculiar manner—a pre arranged

signal between her new-found friend and herself.

Nellie Belzer slipped the bolt, and smiled with relief and pleasure as Nugget Nell grasped her hand, and then closed and bolted the door.

Her first words caused Nellie to be almost overcome with nervous excitement.

"Nellie Belzer, prepare yourself for the most glorious news that you could possibly dream of receiving!"

As she spoke, she threw her arms around her friend.

"In the first place, I have had, or came near having, a knife-duel with the 'Terrantaler' of Taos, who is on your track. You see, I give you the bad news first. Then, I was forced to shoot two bandits, to preserve the life of a fine-looking scout, who had previously saved me from being wiped out by the giant from Santa Fe.

"Lastly, I have been within ten feet of—well, whom do you suppose?"

"I have not the least idea," said Nellie Belzer shuddering as the strange girl spoke so coolly of having shot two men.

"You have been riding out on the plain in the night, for your clothing is damp with dew."

There was a strange wildness in poor Nellie's eyes. She seemed to dread any further disclosures of the wanderings of her friend having suspicious that Lucretia Cole might be on her track.

These suspicions caused her to be doubly affected, as Nell again spoke:

"I have been within ten feet of your lover, Nellie Belzer—the dashing Herbert Ives!"

The young girl clutched her companion by the arms, trembling in every limb; then, when she fully comprehended the glorious news, she exclaimed, in devout thankfulness:

"Thank Heaven! At last—at last! Tell me, where is he—where is Herbert?"

"Not two miles from here," was the answer; "encamped at the head of a gulch in the range. There is another young gentleman with him, and a boy who, but a short time since, was captured by an Apache brave, but was rescued by a scout."

"Rocky Mountain Al, another noted scout, is with them. It was he who saved me from the Tarantula, at Pilgrim's Palace."

"What a strange, but dear and noble girl you are, Nell! You have gone through terrors this night, that would have killed me."

"The young man, who is with Herbert, is my cousin, George Belzer, and the boy is Charley Ives, Herbert's brother, who insisted on accompanying them."

"Oh, Nell! I must go to Herbert this very night. I cannot rest. I shall become insane, if I am forced to remain here another hour."

"I am nearly insane with joy now. Oh, Nell, if we can only find my father next, we will all return to the Hudson together! I can never part with you again Nell—never!"

The lips of the Waif of the Mountains quivered, and a tear fell, as she spoke:

"Nellie Belzer, I thank you for what you say, for I know you are sincere. What the future may have in store for me, I do not know; but I feel that I shall never leave the range. This man, whom you know as Carl Cole, must die by my hand. I have vowed this and I feel assured that I will keep my oath."

"But, Nellie, you must not leave this house to-night. I will see that you meet Herbert Ives to-morrow. There is danger abroad. The Pumas, a bandit band, are out; for, as I have told you, I was forced to shoot two of them to save the life of that brave scout, Rocky Mountain Al."

"Obey me now, Nellie, and go to bed. I must now return the horse of the scout; but I shall not, unless I change my mind, go near the camp. So-long, Nellie!"

With these words, Nugget Nell darted from the room without waiting to hear the earnest pleadings of Miss Belzer to accompany her.

Springing upon her horse, Nell dashed off, on her return up the range, leading the black steed of the scout; being observed, as has been shown by Doubloon Dan and the Tarantula, as she galloped up the wash-out.

Upon reaching the spur of the cliff, she dashed at great speed around it, and released the black horse, which galloped up the gulch to the camp.

The attention of the young men was drawn down the gulch by the clattering hoofs, weapons being grasped and held ready; but as the steed, fully equipped, darted toward his master, and the Waif of the Range arose in her stirrups, and waved her sombrero over her head, a rousing cheer rung from the throat of Rocky Mountain Al. George Belzer rushed forward, crying out:

"Nellie! Cousin Nellie!"

Herbert Ives stood speechless; but Nugget Nell whirled her horse about, and dashed at headlong speed from view down the gulch.

Not ten minutes elapsed after the departure of Nell from the room in the attic of the Bug Juice Bazaar, when Nellie Belzer caught up her hat and ran down the stairs, and out into the street. She proceeded in the direction of Pilgrim's Palace by the rear of the shanties, where there were a number of horses.

Her face was pale, but filled with determination, as she sprung upon one of these animals, and rode off past the ghastly corpses of the men who had been killed in Pilgrim's Palace.

Galloping up the range, knowing not where to go, except to seek a gorge in the mountains some two miles north, she sped on, entering the foot-hills; and, eventually, the near vicinity of the cedars, that grew thick along the base of the mountains.

While thus dashing ahead, her eyes eagerly scanning the range to discover a break in the same, a score of mounted men spurred their snorting steeds out from the wood; and, the next moment Nellie Belzer was surrounded.

She sat on her saddle like one suddenly stricken with death. Horror and dread seemed pictured and frozen upon her face. There was now no hope!

CHAPTER XIX.

NUGGET NELL INTERVIEWED.

"PARDS, I'm after her! I'll gaze into the eyes of that brave and daring girl before she clears the wash-out!"

It was Rocky Mountain Al who spoke. Nugget Nell had just waved her sombrero, and dashed from the view of those in the camp. Al sprung upon his horse.

Nell had not the remotest idea that she would be pursued; but she went, at a fast gallop down the gulch nevertheless, for she wished to rejoin Nellie Belzer, fearing that she would start out in spite of everything, in search of Herbert Ives.

Her absence of mind, she pondering and planning to bring matters to a favorable issue for her friend, and also to consummate her revenge upon the so-called Carl Cole, together with the sound made by her horse's hoofs, prevented her from hearing the galloping of one in pursuit, until the scout had nearly overtaken her.

She was then within a short distance of the place where Al had been shot by the bandits.

No sooner did Nugget Nell hear the sound of hoofs behind her than she turned in her saddle and immediately recognized the black steed of the scout.

Knowing that it was useless for her to attempt escaping, the Waif of the Mountains kept on at the same gait, and in a moment after the pursuer was alongside, and Rocky Mountain Al, grasping her bridle-rein, said, as he bent toward and gazed into the eyes of the disguised girl:

"Pardon my rudeness, Miss Nellie Belzer; but it is a pressing necessity that causes me to act thus ungentlemanly toward you. Not only do I wish to thank you ten thousand times for saving my life, as well as for returning my horse just now, but I wish to give you important information, that directly concerns yourself."

"Your pardon is granted, sir," returned Nell, "but I warn you, never attempt to stop me again. My revolvers go off easily, and you might get hurt. Go on with your thanks, and I will count; but you will find it will be tedious and tiresome before you have gotten through with the number you have mentioned."

"But how do you know that I saved your life?"

"I know that you, and none other, shot the bandit who fired at and struck me, when I was riding in pursuit of yourself. I rolled down the bank, and two outlaws came to rob and finish me. You sent them both 'over the range,' for no one else could have known that I was in such danger."

"You might as well admit the fact. It makes little difference, though, whether you do it or not, for it is already recorded by Rocky Mountain Al."

"Why were you pursuing me?" asked the girl, doubly impressed, now that she was face to face with the scout, his fascinating eyes fixed upon hers.

"I wished to see you—to speak with you—for very good reasons, and not, as you may have supposed, from mere curiosity or self-interest."

"The glance, that I had at you in Pilgrim's Palace, proved you to be the original of a photograph, that was placed in my hands by an elderly gentleman, to whom I made a promise that I would find you, and take you to him."

"It was none other, Miss Nellie Belzer, than your poor old father, who now lies ill, and broken in mind, from his long and fruitless search for you."

"Should you judge me to be the sort of person whom he represented his daughter to be?" asked the strange girl, without showing the emotion he had expected.

Al hesitated. He was cornered, as it were, and unable to shape words for a reply; but he soon recovered himself saying:

"Taking everything into consideration, that has been confided to me by your father, I see nothing very strange in your having assumed male attire, if that is what you have reference to; for, you could better pursue your search in that guise."

"And, although I think it is possible you may be aware of the fact, I will now say that

your lover is encamped at the head of the gulch; as well as his little brother, and your cousin, George Belzer.

"I trust that you will return with me, and that I shall have the extreme pleasure of also guiding you to your father, who is now in San Miguel."

"Does Mr. Ives believe that I am his betrothed wife? and, if so, is he not offended at my masquerading in this way, and shooting bandits off-hand?"

"It is useless for me to deceive you in that respect," was the reply. "Indeed you ought to know that he is a gentleman, by birth and education, and that he has been cut to the heart to find that you are—but, never mind."

"He takes into consideration that the persecution you have endured, at your home, the mysterious disappearance of your father, and your being obliged to start out into this far western wilderness in search of himself, the only one to whom you could appeal—all this, he knows, must have warped your mind, and unsettled your judgment. But he is only eager to meet you."

"Your cousin, too, is nearly frantic on your account. You will return with me will you not?"

"Then you all think me insane, do you?"

As Nell asked this question, she broke out into a merry peal of laughter, which after the revelations he had made, convinced Al that she was mad as a March hare. He was perfectly speechless.

Unable to reply, the scout, as he gazed at the Waif of the Rockies, had such a sad look, that the wild girl laughed the more, thus settling in his mind the question of her insanity.

Placing one of her small hands upon Al's shoulder, and gazing into his face for a moment, she said:

"Rocky Mountain Al, you are a brave man, and I respect you! I thank you for coming to my rescue, when the 'Terrantaler o' Taos,' as he calls himself, was about to make an end of me, and—"

"Hold! Excuse me," interrupted the scout. "The Tarantula ran up the gulch, and fell prostrate, in an assumed drunken slumber, in the cedars near our camp. Broncho Jim, a pard of mine, knew him to be a bad citizen, as I did myself, and we intended to make him levant from this vicinity in the morning. But he lit out before we expected, having probably overheard us talking over your family affairs. He is a spy, and may do us mischief. I shall go in hunt of him to-morrow."

"But proceed, and excuse my interruption."

"Well," resumed Nell, "I had an object in picking a quarrel with the scoundrel, which will be made plain to you before two days pass."

"Let me say now, there is a deep mystery in this affair, to all except myself; and I do not think it policy to reveal matters to-night. I wish you, however, to say to Herbert Ives, that Nellie Belzer loves him most devotedly, and that she is the same innocent girl that she was when he bade her farewell on the Palisades of the Hudson. Also, say to George Belzer, that Nellie will join them, and accompany them to San Miguel, within two days."

"Trust me in this, my friend, and all that appears strange and unaccountable will be made plain."

"I cannot see them at present, for I have a mission to fulfill. But you must capture the Tarantula; for he is a dangerous man, and is mixed up in this affair. I have a certain end to accomplish, and I must keep that uppermost in my mind for the present."

"Return to your camp, and allow me to go my own way for to-night and to-morrow. You will trust me, I know; for you believe in me, and you believe that I have the happiness of all in view."

"Nellie, I'll stake my life on you!" said Al, decidedly. "Go your way then, and I will return to the camp, for I need rest and sleep. But, when shall we have the great pleasure of seeing you?"

"If I am not greatly mistaken, the clouds will break away to-morrow night. But my desire is for you all to remain in the gulch, until you see or hear again from Nugget Nell."

"Then you must go without seeing Ives, or your cousin?"

"Rocky Mountain Al," said the girl, "I must go! Seek your blankets, and get some sleep. Be sure and capture the Tarantula to-morrow, if he shows up anywhere near the gulch. So long!"

Al released his hold on the reins of Nugget Nell's horse, and she darted off at terrific speed, in the direction of Chico City.

The scout turned about, and proceeded up the wash-out to the camp, his strange appearance puzzling all; Herbert Ives being in a most wretched state of mind, from the fact that Nellie Belzer had again avoided meeting him.

George Belzer, also, was most painfully perplexed.

Broncho Jim sat on a blanket, wiping out his rifle; the present state of affairs being evidently an enigma which was far beyond his comprehension.

The actions of his old pard, Al, seemed to

him remarkably strange; Jim being extremely jealous at seeing the "tenderfoot" monopolizing the attention of his fellow scout, while he was, so to speak, a mere cipher in the lay-out, although he had taken the most active part in the recent tragic proceedings.

"Gentlemen," said Rocky Mountain Al, as he alighted from his horse; "ask me no questions, but let us all seek the repose we stand so much in need of. It is enough for me to say that we are at present enveloped in mystery; but, within forty-eight hours, I am assured that all will be made clear, and happiness will be a drug in the market."

"You will take my word, Mr. Ives, and you, Mr. Belzer, that what I say I mean, and that I can fulfill what I promise."

"There are good reasons why Miss Nellie Belzer should not meet her friends at present, or she would do so; reasons that will serve, when explained, to raise her in your estimation. Of this I am satisfied, and will stake my honor on it. Are you satisfied, pards?"

"I am willing to stake my happiness, my very life itself, upon your word," said Herbert; "and, although I am strangely bewildered by all this, I know you would not hold out false hopes in regard to everything being ultimately cleared up, in a manner satisfactory to all of us."

"You are sure that Major Belzer will not leave San Miguel, and, in his weak state of mind and body, get lost, or be captured by Indians, or outlaws?"

"I am quite sure that he is safe," said the scout; "and that those I left with him will watch over him."

"Al," asked George, "if I see through this business in the least, there is some hidden work going on—is it not so? Carl Cole and Lucretia must have agents, or spies, who have followed my uncle, and who know the whereabouts of Nellie. It is the suspicion that they have followed her, that has caused my cousin to adopt male attire."

"I presume you are correct," was the reply; "but we shall know more of the case to-morrow, I reckon."

"Pard Jim, we must corral that 'Terrantaler' to-morrow, if he comes in our vicinity. He is in this business, and he threw himself in the thicket pretending to be asleep, for the purpose of hearing what we had to say."

"He knows too much, and we must cut his spurs, and clip his wings. But, boys, we can't afford to waste more time in talk. If you'll keep a lookout down the gulch for a couple of hours, Jim, I'll keep guard for the remainder of the night."

"Pitch in, an' snatch all ther sleep yer want, pards," directed Broncho Jim. "I ain't tired at all, though I didn't jump saddle all yesterday. I'm a-playin' nuss, which air ther yester biz o' ther kind I ever 'members a doin', 'cept tendin' ter some o' ther boyees what war cut er shot. I looks arter Leetle Pard jist now."

All now rolled themselves in their blankets; Al, previous to lying down, having given his black horse a feed of corn, which he had in his saddle-bags. In a few moments, they were sound asleep, being weary and worn, from travel, and the exciting scenes through which they had passed.

Broncho Jim sat in the same position, Charley's head upon his knee; and no sound was heard in the gulch, as the moon rolled westward into the darkness, save the crunching of the scout's steed at his corn.

CHAPTER XX.

THE SECRET RETREAT.

WHEN Nugget Nell parted from Rocky Mountain Al she put her horse to full speed; and, by the same route she had before traveled, brought up at the foot of the outside stairway that led to the room of Nellie Belzer.

Securing her horse, and running rapidly up the steps, she tried the latch and found the door unfastened.

Filled with apprehension, she passed into the room.

Nellie Belzer was not to be seen!

Nugget Nell darted into the other room, but no one was there; she then threw herself upon a lounge, covered her face, and burst into tears.

She felt that, as she had not met her friend on the trail, that the poor girl had been lost in her mad attempt to reach Herbert Ives, or been captured by outlaws.

In this reaction, after the excitement through which she had passed, the poor, weary girl cried herself to sleep, and knew nothing more until the following noon, it having been in the small hours of the morning when she arrived.

When Nellie Belzer found herself surrounded by the masked night-riders, she was so terrified that she sunk forward upon her horse, being only prevented from falling by two bandits, who rode up on either side and supported her.

Then came the order from Doubloon Dan:

"By two—forward!"

At the word the outlaw band entered the dark shades of the cedars, going toward the mountains.

There, they passed into a narrow gorge, that wound, snake-like, toward the heart of the range.

Following this for some distance, they turned around a rocky spur, and entered an arched passage. Going along this, for some fifty yards, at an abrupt turn to the right, two lamps were seen, suspended from iron spikes in the wall, and illuminating the entrance to an extensive cavern.

Passing into this, the hoofs of the horses clattering over the stone floor, all came to a halt.

"Leave your captive in the Diamond Chamber," ordered the chief, addressing the two men who supported Miss Belzer. Then, turning to the band, he added:

"Remove equipments! Feed your nags; and, after a lunch, all retire, except the guard, for to-morrow night we have weighty business on hand."

In the black, glittering eyes of the bandit chief flashed a reckless, merciless look, that proved him a dangerous man; although, at times, he was as mild and polite in speech as a theological student.

Doubloon Dan dismounted, and delivered his horse to one of his band. He then walked to an arched passage, near the place where his two followers had, through a like archway, borne Miss Belzer.

Opening an oaken door at the end of the passage, he entered a cave chamber that was richly furnished; the floor being covered with buffalo-robes and panther skins, and smaller skins decorated artistically with beadwork.

The walls and arched roof of this apartment glittered and glistened in the light of the wax candles that stood upon a table, as if set with thousands of diamonds.

Food, wine and liquors of all kinds were upon the table, and Doubloon Dan, throwing aside his weapons, filled a glass with brandy, tossed the fiery liquor off as if it had been water, and then sat down to supper.

"Well, Doubloon Dan," he soliloquized, when he had finished his repast, "you have so far done well since arriving in the vicinity of Chico City. The boys, it is true, think otherwise. That express safe didn't pan out extra well, but the mail was worth tearing paper. It was lucky I didn't open the letters in the presence of the band, or I shouldn't have made such a big haul for myself."

"Fifty thousand in greenbacks ain't to be picked up every day, and the boys had no idea there was such an amount in the bags; in fact, there seldom is."

"Not only this good luck, but fortune has favored me by placing in my power one who would be taken for a twin sister of Nugget Nell."

"When I saw her at the wreck of that coach on the creek, I was positive it was Nell herself; but now I see my mistake. She is as unlike Nell in disposition and temperament as she is like her in form and face."

"All that I ever disliked about Nugget Nell was her fiery temper and unmaidenly boldness; and since I have seen this Nellie Belzer, as the Tarantula calls her, I realize that her sensitive nature has more charms for me than ever that handsome tom-boy had."

"I would have married Nell, quit this risky business, and made a lady of her; but her chances are slim now, since this Miss Belzer has come upon the scene."

"What's more, if I have the run of the cards, she is an heiress, and of excellent family."

"The parties in Santa Fe, who are so anxious to have her and her father put out of the way, must be captured, and pumped by force. That is settled. They know nothing about Nugget Nell, and, by Jove! it wouldn't be a bad idea to run her in on them, after I get them corraled, and give them a surprise party."

"Nell could astonish them amazingly, and it would be as good as a circus to witness the interview. They would be apt to think the girl they were after had changed some since she struck the range, and they might become convinced that she wasn't one who could be very easily 'removed.'"

"I'll bleed them of every dollar, keep them on short grub, and force the whole story from them."

"Then, by getting this girl's father in my power, I can, through him, force her to marry me. I am getting disgusted with this rough life, and I have enough to keep me in ease and luxury the remainder of my days. Besides, I have had a kind of presentiment of late that my career will be cut short in some way."

"To-morrow night will, I think, be an eventful one for me, and I need sleep and rest. I shall dream of that girl, to a certainty. She's as lovely as an angel, and I feel like an insignificant pusillanimous wretch, but a little above the beasts, when I look at her."

"But luck always did perch within my grasp, and I'll not worry about imaginary dangers. I'll to my couch, and recuperate, for the business I have ahead of me needs strong nerves."

Thus ending his soliloquy, Doubloon Dan threw himself upon his couch of skins and was soon sleeping soundly and quietly, notwithstanding the fact that he was a merciless bandit, whose hands had often been stained with the

blood of helpless, unarmed men, whom he had robbed of life and money at the same time.

When the two outlaws conveyed Nellie Belzer into the passage, as ordered by their chief, they passed through a door similar to that which had admitted Doubloon Dan, and entered a cave chamber, richly furnished. There they laid the senseless girl upon a couch, and sprinkled some water upon her face.

A table, upon which were some wines and food, was placed by her side, within easy reach; then the bandits left the apartment, feeling sure that the fair captive would soon recover her senses.

They were correct in this opinion. At the sound of the clang of her prison door, which made a terrific noise in the arched chamber, she sprung to a sitting posture on the couch, and opened her limped blue eyes in bewilderment and perplexity, not, for some little time, realizing her position, location, or the near past.

Slowly, however, the events of the night floated in panoramic style before her mind's eye; the facts that were most glaringly prominent being exactly opposite in character and impressiveness.

Nugget Nell had caused her to feel happier than she had been for months, by informing her that Herbert Ives, for whom she had so long sought, and who was never absent from her thoughts, was within two short miles of her; and that in his company was her cousin, George Belzer, as noble and daring a young man as ever lived, and who had, before accompanying Herbert on this expedition, braved the dangers of the Texan frontiers with "Reckless Joe."

When Nellie had realized that these friends were so near, she determined that she would see them before the morning. She could not sleep. She could not sit nor stand still a moment, so great was her excitement, so intense her happiness.

Then she had, regardless of the warning of Nugget Nell and her positive orders, gone out into the night, stolen a horse, and sped up the range toward the spot where, as she understood, Nell, Herbert, George and Charley were encamped.

This ended that picture. Then came a view of dark woods and towering mountains, illuminated by a silvery moon; these, the background to a view that was appalling in the extreme.

For out from the dark dashed a horde of horsemen, black masks covering their faces, and fiendish eyes shooting glances from out the holes of these masks that burned into her very soul.

She remembered being surrounded by these masked night-riders, the blood congealing in her veins with horror, as the silent, terrible, death suggestive horde encircled her. She had felt an electric-like darting and flashing in her brain, and then all was darkness and oblivion.

But now—where was she?

While striving to recall the near past she had pressed both palms over her aching brows and burning eyes; but she removed them as the above mental question formed itself in her mind.

She gazed quickly around upon her surroundings above, below, everywhere, and was bewildered and horrified by what she saw.

Adamantine walls, and arched roof and floor, all as if hewn from solid rock, glittering in a blinding manner, reflecting the light of numerous wax tapers.

By her side were food and drink.

Beneath her was a couch of skins.

She perceived, at length, that she was in a cavern—a rock chamber of the mountains; she knew that she was a prisoner—a prisoner in the hands of those fearful masked night-riders.

No sooner did Nellie realize this clearly than she sprung from the couch out upon the stone floor, her arms wildly beating the air, her beautiful blue eyes glassy and glaring with hopeless despair, her fair face contorted with a terrible dread, as she cried out, from her inmost soul:

"Oh, God! hast Thou forsaken me at last? Oh, Father in Heaven, look down on me and pity me! Oh, mother mine! why didst thou not warn thy weak child? My cross is greater than I can bear!"

"Lost! lost! lost! Plunged from happiness to the very depths of misery, just as the reward for all the privations and anguish I have endured was within my grasp; then to be hurled into such gloom and despair!"

"Oh, Herbert, never more will you see your long-suffering Nellie—never—nevermore!"

"Doomed to a worse than death, when within perhaps a rifle-shot of those I have sought so long!"

"Doomed to be the victim of a bandit, whose crimes forbid him to show his face even in the night-time!"

"Oh, my heart, my brain! I shall die!"

"Yes, I shall die; but welcome death, for with death comes rest and peace. And I shall meet my mother then. She waits for her daughter at the Golden Gate. Yes, she will meet me. Mother—will—meet—Nellie!"

Gradually the words of the poor girl, at first loud and half-shrieked, died down, until at last

they were but whispers, from almost colorless, quivering lips; her eyes seeming to gaze beyond, through the rock archway of her prison, heavenward.

Then, as the last word was whispered, her eyes became expressionless, her angelic form swayed back and forth, and she sunk, limp and senseless, upon the stone floor of the cavern!

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TARANTULA INTERVIEWED.

THE "Terrantaler o' Taos," after having been "corraled" by Doubloon Dan, had, much to his satisfaction, been lucky enough to have the opportunity of showing Nugget Nell to the bandit chief, as she rode up the wash-out, with the horse of Rocky Mountain Al in the lead.

The giant was ignorant of the fact that the outlaw knew her. The latter quickly discovered that, if he wished any information from the burly ruffian, he would be forced to "pump" him very shortly, or the Tarantula would be speechless; for the latter had drank much through the previous evening, and had only been kept from sleep, in the cedar thicket at the gulch, by the extreme and deadly danger, which he knew threatened him, through Al and Broncho Jim.

The unreasonably big drink he had taken from the canteen had imparted, or instilled him with new life; but Dan knew that this would not last long, therefore he decided not to return to his secret retreat until he had first heard the story of his captive.

Giving a peculiar whistle that brought his band to a halt, a rifle-shot from him, Dan ordered the giant to follow him into the cedars, dismount, and secure his horse. He then called upon him to reveal his plans, with as little extra "chin" as he could dispense with, and do himself justice.

"Dog-gone my cast iron heart, Cap Dan! I'll do bit in ther flicker o' a big-horn's tail."

So said the border "hero," with an air and manner of extreme satisfaction and importance, as he guided his horse after the chief into the dark shades.

When the animals had been secured, Doubloon Dan seated himself on the ground, while the giant threw himself at length, placing his elbows on the ground, and supporting his head by resting his chin and face upon his outspread hands.

"Rec'lect, Cap," said he, "thet I'm a roarin' rager, an' I beats ther univarse on gittin' infermashe, an' I spits out ther solid hum-spun fac's without varnish, when I slings 'Nited States ter a pilgrim what I condescends ter pard with through a job thet I can't whoop-er-up easy myself, with a show fer rakin' ther pot!"

"What sort of people are these Santa Fe tenderfeet, who are so anxious to corral Nugget Nell?" asked Doubloon Dan, without paying the slightest attention to the introductory of the giant.

"Ther caliker critter air chain lightnin'," said the Tarantula; "an' her eyes snaps fire every time she winks. She's game; she's gut sand, she hes, an' ther cuss what's with her hes ter wilt, when she gives ther word. Though I reckon hit's more on 'count o' her holdin' ther 'dust,' then fer want o' grit in him."

"He's not so very high fly; but I'm bettin' he's sent his man ter grass more'n onc't, though he mought ha' shot 'em in ther back."

"He's purty crooked, I'm gamblin', an' ef he gut a show ter git ther caliker critter's wealth I'm dead sure he'd p'ison her an' plant her in a corn-sack ter save 'spences, tradin' her off ter ther fust Jew he run ag'in'."

"You think they'll come in to-morrow night's hearse, do you?" asked the bandit chief.

"I'd stake my critter on hit! Ther high-fly caliker war anxious ter flicker this-a-ways soon's I tole her 'bout Chico bein' off ther reg'lar trail, an' thet it war a burg jist slapped up. Coz why? Yer see ther young feller what Nell's a huntin' air a boss miner, an' air ther chap, Mister Cole said, ter strike fer a new 'find,' ter git a show es ingineer o' a mine, an' ther gal, know'n this, would be mighty apt to reason thet-a-way, an' glide fer Chico City."

"Howsomever, hit 'pears ter me thet Nell air brash an' cussed enough ter take both on 'em in oven ther wet, ef she air so incernated, an' pervidin' we-uns doesn't kerral her afore ther shemal an' hemale 'roves in Chico on her trail."

"But I'm a-asserwatin' thet we must git her inter ther rocks, an' keep her oven ther game, or we-uns loses a big stake, fer I'm dead sure ther Santa Fe pair hes gut wealth."

"How about Major Belzer, the girl's father? Have you spotted him yet?"

"Hain't sot my peepers onter him comin' up ther range. I opines he's north o' Rayton Pass, an' he'll show up in Chico in a few flectin' perriods."

"Howsomever, I don't reckon he'll pan out much wealth, though I gits a thousan' dollars fer kerralin' him. We'll scoop ther gal fust off, an' then ther Santa Fe folkses. We-uns'll then hev ther game in our own han's. Thet's ther hull thing clear through, Cap; but I war most cussedly bamboozled at Pilgrim's Palace, when ther gal slapped my beautiful pictur', an' jerked her sticker ter carve an' parferate my 'Pollo-

like form. They tole me et Santa Fe th t she war do-sile an' innercent es a suckin' pappoose."

"She must ha' slung herself permisc'us-like 'roun' ther range, fer some moons ter pan out so brash, cranky, an' peart wi' her slasher, 'sides w'arin' men's togs."

"Ef Rocky Mountain Al hedn't made a break fer me I'd a' snatched her sticker, tuck her under my arm, spite o' her squirmin' an' squallin', an' skuted for ther cedars on ther hum, yer kin jist gamble."

"Howsomever, we'll kerral her, Cap, spite o' Broncho Jim an' Al, an' ther tender-huffs, fer I'm high-fly on ther scoop in, I am!"

"Doesn't yer hear ther ding-dong o' my iron heart? I'm ther Terrantaler o' Taos, what never lost a leg, an' my sting air death. I'm p'ison from ha'r to huffs!"

The voice of the giant had gradually become lower and lower, his head sinking, and his last words were but a murmur, barely intelligible.

When he ceased speaking, his head fell upon the dead leaves, a series of spasmodic snorts sounded in the ears of Doubloon Dan, soon changing to a regular beast like snore.

The bandit chief arose to his feet, and mounting his horse, proceeded out from the cedars, with the intention of following the margin of the same until near his men; knowing that the Tarantula would sleep far into the following day.

No sooner had Doubloon Dan gone out into the moonlight, than, to his surprise and exultation, he discovered a female equestrian dashing up the range, a long, black vail flying behind her from her hat.

Even at some distance, as he waited in the shadows of the cedars, he recognized her as the maiden he had seen at the wrecking of the stage, who had been protected by Jim Harding, and whom he had mistaken for Nugget Nell.

She was, in form and feature, the very counterpart of the latter, the only difference being in dress and complexion.

Doubloon Dan now knew that Nugget Nell was not the party who was wanted by the pair of conspirators at Santa Fe, but the girl before him, who might reasonably be supposed to be her twin sister.

It was not Nugget Nell who had been in the stage. No wonder she had laughed at him when he questioned her in regard to it.

All was clear to him now, and he determined to act immediately.

This girl had probably been informed that her lover was encamped in the gulch.

She had been long seeking him, and now, fearing he would not enter Chico City, she had mounted a horse, and was endeavoring to find him.

Doubloon Dan's mind was much relieved; for he had taken a fancy to Nugget Nell, and he feared, from this late report, that she was in love with this young mining engineer. Now, however, his jealousy was banished.

Giving a shrill whistle, followed, after an interval, by three more, he galloped along in the shade of the cedars; his band, in obedience to his signal, spurring from the wood, and surrounding Nellie Belzer, as has been detailed.

The sun had reached the meridian on the day following the eventful night, during which those who have had our sympathy were so filled with anxiety from various causes.

The Tarantula's eyes opened—eyes that were wild and blood-shot, and framed in bruised, swollen flesh and scraggy brows, above which was a shock of wild, tangled hair, filled with dry leaves.

For a moment the giant gazed about, and above him, amazement and perplexity battling against the insane thirst that tortured him, and the darting of an electric-like agony through his fevered brain.

It was only for an instant. Then, with a terrific bound, he sprung to his feet, with dread and horror in his brutal countenance, as he whirled about, and tore up into the branches of a cedar, as though fiends from Hades were at his heels.

Gaining a safe distance, as high up in fact as the dimensions of the tree promised to sustain him; the giant trembling in every limb, ghastly pallor showing even through tan and dirt, and blood-stains, wedged himself between limb and trunk, clutching them with desperation and terror.

Thence he gazed downward, through the sparse foliage with bulging eyes.

At the point upon which his vision was now fixed, was a curiously shaped, fire-blackened stump, reaching some five feet above the ground; two arm-like stubs of limbs projected from it, some eighteen inches from the splintered top, while, stretched along the ground at its base, was a huge dead grape-vine, the larger end elevated about six inches from the carpet of leaves.

For full five minutes, the "Terrantaler o' Taos" gazed open mouthed; his features showing the expressions we have before mentioned.

At times he rubbed his eyes vigorously, and winked and blinked spasmodically; when, slowly his face began to show far different emotions.

Relief, blended with shame and mirth, in a comical manner were plainly manifest, as he burst out in his peculiar soliloquy.

"Wa-al, condemn my puserianmous, no-count, bamboozled brain! Ef thar warn't consider'ble extry ding-dong inter my iron heart, when I stompeded up this hyer cedar, I'm ther boss pervaricator o' New Mex'!"

"But I sw'ar ef thet ain't a sight ter make a mixed-up human hump hisself! I hopes ter be nibbled ter death by red ants ef hit ain't!"

"I thought, dead sure an' sartin, thet a black b'ar an' ther boss snake o' ther range hed pard-ed tergether ter squeeze my breath out, an' hash me up fer feed. Dang'd ef hit didn't take ther snarl an' leaves outen my sculp, an' I c'u'd hear my ha'r snap like a perrarer on fire! Whar in thunderation air I? How comed I ter be in this hyer dang'd cedar-brake?"

"Dang'd ef hit hain't past noon, an' I'm es weak es a cat-fish what's been left high an' dry arter a rise. I 'members seein' Doubloon Dan, an' lettin' loose my tongue on Santa Fe biz."

"I reckon now he'll leave me in ther lurch, an' cabbage ther wealth, ef I doesn't keep my peepers peeled. Hit's dangerous ter glide inter Chico, but ef I knowed they'd plug me es full o' holes es a perforated plaster, I'd hev ter skute in fer some bug-juice. Thar's snakes a-hatchin' in my butes, dead sure; an' my iron heart doesn't ding-dong wo'th a picayune. But I'll cheek her through er bust!"

"I'm es high-fly es ther 'Merikin Eagle! I'm ther Terrantaler o' Taos! Whoop-er-up! Whoop-er-e-e-e!"

Down clambered the giant, reaching the ground with difficulty, when, to his relief and joy, he discovered his horse.

Loosening the lariat, he climbed into the saddle, nearly falling upon the ground on the opposite side. He then walked the animal slowly toward Chico City, he presenting a truly miserable and horrid appearance, as he cast glances of apprehension up the range, fearing to discover the scouts, whom he had so cunningly evaded the previous night.

As he approached the rear of Pilgrim's Palace, he saw a crowd of boisterous men, and would at once have turned his horse another way, had he not been aware that they had observed him.

Jerking their revolvers, and aiming at the giant, one of them yelled:

"Spur up thar, er we'll bore yer! Yer 'lected 'nauermously ter be stiff-planter fer Chico City!"

CHAPTER XXII.

DOUBLOON DAN IS HEARD FROM.

THE "Terrantaler o' Taos" knew well the character of the men who hailed him, and he dared not disobey, although he felt that he was putting his head in the lion's mouth.

Riding up closer, he recognized a score or more of the hangers-on at Pilgrim's Palace, among whom were mingled a few of the better class of miners the man who had hailed him being Hank Hall, the sheriff of the burg.

A roar of laughter burst from the crowd as the giant approached and his condition became apparent.

The Tarantula saw that a large hole had been excavated, and that several of the men had spades and pick-axes. The corpses of those who had been killed in Pilgrim's Palace lay side by side near at hand, and a most ghastly spectacle they were, the sun having blackened their faces, and the bodies being swollen to nearly twice their natural size.

"Hump yerself this-a-ways lively," called out the sheriff. "Yer started ther row what sent some o' these stiffes over ther divide, an' yer hes gut ter finish plantin' 'em, er we'll sling yer in with 'em an' kiver yer up!"

"He 'pears ter be 'bout ripe enough ter plant—dog-goned ef he doesn't!" said a miner.

"Dang'd ef he hain't bin chaved up an' spit out by a griz' b'ar!" asserted another, which caused a perfect roar of laughter.

"Boyees," said the giant, as his horse came to a halt near the crowd, the rider grasping the saddle-horn for support and trembling in every limb, his eyes glaring wildly: "boyees, I war fool 'nough las' night, when I war chuck full o' p'ison, ter climb ther range an' repose myself on ther peak, an' dog-goned ef a big-horn didn't butt me off!"

"I rolled clean down, knockin' some bowlders off'n the rough places, an' come a-flyin', strikin' bottom in a thick motte o' cedars, which hes spiled my show fer gittin' my fortygraph tooken fer some moons, I reckon."

"Howsomever, I doesn't keer 'bout bein' scarified, mashed an' scratched, half es much es 'bout my in-'ards. Boyees, I'm jist dead gone fer some bug-juice. Ther ding-dong o' my iron heart hes simmered down ther flicker of a hummin' bird's wing. Ef thar's p'ison in Chico, lef' arter las' night, slide her out, an' I hes ther 'dust' ter treat ther crowd ontill ye're all a-b'illin' over."

"I'll sw'ar, I'm so stiff I can't git off my critter, an' a Pinte pappoose c'u'd skin my head without my bein' able ter wink at hit. I'm on ther skute over ther divide, an' yer'll hev a extra stiff ter plant ef yer doesn't show some whisk'."

So forlorn, miserable, weak and helpless was the Tarantula, that the crowd—any of whom could understand his condition, having "been there" themselves—refrained from ridiculing him further. Rough men though they were, his apparent sufferings filled them with sympathy and pity.

No one knew anything about him, except that he had arrived in Chico City the previous night; had got blind fighting drunk, and been slapped in the face by Nugget Nell; and that when resenting this

insult he had been knocked senseless by Rocky Mountain Al, and trampled upon.

It was only natural that he should have resented the insult, the sex of his assailant being unknown to him; and the difference in their size and strength, being, in the excitement of the moment, not considered.

Neither was it strange that he imagined he had rolled from the peak of the mountain; he having probably dreamed that this had occurred.

Thus the crowd reasoned, knowing also that he was not responsible for the fight occasioned by the scramble for the dollars, and the deaths that ensued.

Perhaps the offer to furnish free whisky favored such liberal reasonings on the part of the crowd. Indeed, taking their general character into consideration, it seemed more than probable.

However, there was some hesitation in the matter of producing the liquor; the wretched appearance of the gigantic stranger favoring the supposition that he was not in possession of sufficient "dust" to pay for it.

This suspicion was, however, soon banished by the pleading victim of border bug-juice, who said, in a still weaker voice:

"Sheriff Hall, I hes heerd o' yer down ther range es a squar' man. Come an' snatch some wealth outen my pouch, an' fotch out a gallon o' whisk'. I feel as though I c'u'd pour down a bar'l!"

The compliment, together with the mention of his name, by a man who he knew had been in the burg but a few hours—and during that time had, as Hank thought, been too drunk to know his own name—flattered the sheriff exceedingly; and the giant rose a peg higher in his estimation, as the worthy official complied with his request. Hank did not recall the fact that his name and rank had been mentioned in the hearing of the badly used up man.

Much to the surprise of everybody present, Hank drew from the pouch a roll of coin, which, upon opening, proved to be double eagles; and exposing the shining gold to the audience, the sheriff returned the money, retaining but one of the gold pieces.

"Boyees," said Hank, "lift ther poor cuss off. He pans out well—Simon pure hard ore ontill yer can't rest. We'll prime him up, an' fix him straight, afore a quartz mill c'u'd chaw up a hunderd poun' o' rock."

It was no easy matter to get the Tarantula off his horse. Four men strained their muscles to accomplish the feat, for he had become stiff and rigid; in fact he was in a terrible condition.

They laid him on the sward, and placed a piece of dead wood under him; Hank soon appearing with a demijohn of whisky and a tin cup, and Tom Mathews, the barkeeper, following him, in wonder and curiosity, to the rear door.

The latter refrained from giving the sheriff his opinion of the burly ruffian, realizing now that he was likely to be a paying customer.

The Tarantula was raised to a sitting posture, and a half-pint of whisky held to his trembling lips, which he drank with insane avidity. He then sunk back to his former position, and closed his eyes.

"Some on yer hump yerselves fer some water, an' wash ther poor cuss's head," ordered Hank; "an' then we'll hev a big drink all 'roun'."

The water was brought, and one of the range bums produced an old comb, which he had probably stolen from some stage station, as it was of the kind used in combing out the tails and manes of horses.

With this the hair of the giant was, in a manner, disentangled, and made more presentable. Hank then bathed his face with whisky, amid the indignant protests of the crowd; he replying, as he did so:

"Don't grumble, boyees. He paid fer this whisk', an' he needs hit, both outside an' inside. Hist him up, some on yer, an' I'll pour some down his neck. He war purty nigh skippin' over ther range, an' hit 'u'd take a big hole, an' a heap o' diggin' ter plant him!"

After Hank's generous libation, the giant was laid back again on the ground; the sheriff now calling out:

"O-o-o-oh, yes! O-o-o-o-oh, yes! Come up, boyees, an' errigate yer in-'ards! Thar's only one cup, but I don't reckon we'll fight es long es thar is sich a hefty supply o' chain lightnin' on hand. Hyer's ter ther speedy reoperate o' ther Terrantaler o' Taos!"

All eagerly crowded around the sheriff, who, as expeditiously as possible, filled the tin cup as fast as it was emptied, each drinking at least double the quantity they would have gotten at a single drink at the bar.

When this was done, all turned toward the man through whom the liquor had been obtained, and to their surprise, saw that he was sitting upright; appearing after his toilet, like another man, and the whisky having started his blood in rapid circulation.

"Boyees," said the Tarantula, "I'm dog-goned 'bleeged ter yer all. I'm beginnin' ter come roun' hunk. Slide 'long some more o' thet p'ison. Ther ha'r o' ther dog air good fer ther bite. I kin hear ther ding-dong o' my iron heart ag'in, but she flickered down feeble a while ago."

After taking another drink, the giant arose to his feet, and began to walk back and forth; glancing at times toward the crowd, who were making ready the large grave for the reception of the six corpses.

"Thet air a job," said he, at length, "what needs vim and muscle. Better take a drink wi' ther Terrantaler o' Taos, an' I reckon arter thet I'll hev stren'th 'nough ter pass ther stiffes down."

This speech was hailed with approbation, and once more the preparations for the burial proceeded; which were interrupted, however, by the appearance of Tom Mathews, with a brass-bound box, which all recognized as belonging to the two dead monte dealers.

"Boys," said Mathews, as he placed the box on the ground, and all collected around him, while he fumbled in the pockets of the dead for a key: "they owe me a month's rent for the table, and about twenty dollars for drinks. So I think I have the best claim on whatever is in their box. What do you say, sheriff?"

"Thet's fa'r an' squar', sure an' sartin! Ther hull outfit an' lay-out b'longs ter Pilgrim's Palace, 'cordin' ter law. Bud, I reckon, kept ther key—"

"Here it is!" announced the barkeeper. "Now,

witness me display the contents of the box, Sheriff Hall."

Hank stooped beside Tom, who turned the key, and threw up the lid of the box, displaying a number of packs of cards, both new and old. These, with several rolls of ivory checks—red, white, and blue—were removed. Then, to the amazement of all, Mathews held up two black masks, such as are worn by road-agents or bandits.

"Great grasshoppers! Gaze at them things," said Tom. "I knew the boys were crooked at cards, but this gets me. It knocks me blind!"

"Dog my cats, ef hit doesn't sot me back, too!" said the sheriff. "Dang'd ef I doesn't b'lieve they war spies o' ther Pumas, what's glided up the range lately, an' what wrecked Jim Hardin's hearse."

"I think you've hit the nail on the head, Hank!" agreed Mathews, who was reading a letter which he had found under the masks.

"Just listen to this, boys:

"GRIZZLY GULCH.

"PARD BUD:—I shall strike up the range in a day or two, and locate near Chico City. Hope you have kept your eye peeled, and can put us on the right trail to rake in the dust. I hear that the mills are running, and paying well. Keep on flipping paste-boards, and mark well who carries the nuggets; for we are low in funds, not having made a stake in some time. Find out what days the dust is shipped on the hearse. You will see me soon."

"Ever, on the make,

"DOUBLOON DAN."

"Dang'd ef I doesn't b'lieve Rocky Mountain Al know'd who he war buckin' ag'in; an' Bill s'pected he know'd, when he kep' his eye on him while ther keards war bein' flipped."

"Al hev busted up a heap o' sich stock, an' he's in ther biz till yit. Fact air, boyees, we-'uns has got ter make a move, an' hunt Doubloon Dan, er he'll go through ther burg some night. Dang'd ef I hain't gettin' mad! Hove 'em in, an' kiver 'em up out o' sight—ther cussed, or'nary pirates!"

"Ef Dan shakes hisself 'round' hyer, hit'll hurt ther burg right smart."

Thus spoke the sheriff, and the dead bandits were hurled into one end of the big grave, and earth thrown upon them; the other dead men being separated from the outlaws by a partition of stones, when all were covered from sight forever.

The Tarantula had stood, pale as death, when the box had been open, and he trembled in his boots as the letter was being read, thinking that perhaps Doubloon Dan had referred to him in it, which, if he had, would have caused him to be dragged to the nearest tree and hanged like a dog. All this was, of course, only his whisky-born imagination; for the letter had evidently been written previous to his interview with the bandit chief.

A heavy sigh of relief was breathed, as the investigation ended, and the giant whose emotion had not been noticed, assisted at the burial.

Some surprise had been manifested in Chico at the non-arrival of the stage from the station on the main line; but, as the same delay had occurred before from the down country coaches being behind time, no one had ridden out on the trail to ascertain the cause.

The burial now being over, and Tom Mathews having returned to the bar some time previous, all were amazed by seeing the barkeeper rush frantically to the door and yelling at the top of his voice:

"Here, sheriff! Here all of you! Run lively! The 'hearse' has been robbed, and Job Jason is in the bar, shot to pieces! He can't live five minutes."

A mad rush was made into and through the gambling-room.

Job Jason lay, stretched out upon the bar counter, covered with blood and dirt, Mathews bending over him.

"He's crawled on his hands and knees clear from beyond the turn in the trail, on the other side of the hill," asserted the barkeeper, deep grief and solicitude in his voice and manner.

"Air yer bad shot, Job?" asked Hank Hall, "an' how come hit?"

"Three insides—mail—cut traces—stock gone—Doubloon Dan—good-by, boyees—over ther range!"

With these words, a convulsive tremor shook the stage-driver's frame. Job Jason was dead.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE MILLS OF THE GODS.

DOUBLOON DAN slept not soundly. Such men but seldom do. He was harassed by dread dreams, and the sun was but just above the horizon, when he sprang from his couch of skins, although, for all that he could tell, in his cave chamber, without consulting his watch, it might have been sunset. The wax candles had nearly burned down; and, igniting others, he placed a whistle, that was attached to his neck by a gold chain, to his lips, and blew a shrill call. It sounded startlingly strange and weird in the arched cavern.

The bandit chief then walked to the door, and turned the key; striding back, when he had done so to the table, and drinking a stiff horn of brandy.

His face was now ghastly pale and haggard, indicating that his dreams had not been pleasant.

An abrupt tap sounded at the door.

"Come in!" cried Captain Dan, in a husky voice.

The door opened, and a ruffianly-looking bandit stepped inside a pace or two, and remained silent.

The chief whirled about, facing him, and said:

"Jim, come and take a drink! Then go and ascertain if our fair captive is asleep."

"All right, Cap," retur ed the man, as he walked to the table, drank the proffered glass, and then strode from the apartment, shutting the door after him.

"If I was strongly inclined to be superstitious," said Doubloon Dan, in soliloquy, "I should feel that my end was near. I never had such a dream before in my life. In fact, I believe I should have died had I not spru'g from my bed, for I was choking for breath, and could feel the rope about my neck."

"I can, even now, see clearly the faces of the mob; and the strangest part of the business is, that I have seen the same faces about Chico City. I oughtn't to have drunk that brandy before retiring—that fixed me; put me in a nervous condition, and banished sleep of a natural and refreshing kind."

Again came a tap at the door.
"Come in, Jim!"
The door opened, and the chief turned, saying:
"Well, how is she?"
"Stretched on the floor, Cap, in a strange way. Reckon she's laid thar all night!"
"The devil, you say! Bring a bottle of brandy, and a glass—quick!"

With these words the bandit chief rushed from the chamber, and into the one adjoining.

Nellie Belzer lay as she had fallen, shortly after having been placed in her rock-bound prison.

She had more the appearance of a corpse than a living being. Her beautiful hair lay loose on the floor, her eyes were but half open, the lids seeming rigid, and her arms, half bare and white as alabaster, were thrown over her head.

Doubloon Dan, outlaw though he was, stopped in his tracks, his eyes filled with torturing regret; then he quickly placed his hand upon her breast, the change in his face showing that he felt a faint pulsation.

At this moment Jim entered with the brandy; he evidently having stopped a moment on the way to take another drink.

Dan lifted Nellie in his arms and placed her again upon the couch of skins. Then, grasping the brandy bottle, he poured out a glass, and, raising the seemingly death-struck girl to a sitting posture, he placed the goblet to her lips, allowing but a slight quantity of the liquor to enter her mouth at a time.

The poor girl swallowed feebly several times; then the bandit laid her again gently upon the skins and bathed her head and face with the brandy, covering her with a thick robe. She soon began to show, by her easy breathing, that she had fallen into a deep and natural slumber; and that, without awakening to a realization of her whereabouts or condition.

As the bandit chief bent over her, his face showing the relief he felt, he said to his follower:

"I wouldn't have that girl die on our hands for fifty thousand dollars, Jim! Did you ever see a more beautiful face? She is like what we imagine angels to be; though, I reckon, you and I are not likely ever to know how they do look."

"She's too skim-milky for this world, Cap, 'specially fer this part of it," was the reply. "As to seein' angels, dang'd ef I b'lieve thar is any sich cattle!"

"Hit's all 'magination, an' I'm gamblin' on hit,"
Had Dan or Jim looked upward, at the point where the arched roof joined the perpendicular wall, they would have seen what might have caused them to think they were soon to settle the vexed question in regard to the future state; for two deadly tubes were leveled upon them—two Colt's navy revolvers, clutched in the little hands of Nugget Nell!

But they saw her not; indeed they dreamed not of gazing upward to the adamant walls, where, in their opinion, no human being could penetrate.

Lucky was it for Doubloon Dan that his actions were tender and sympathetic toward his captive; for the least rude act or word toward the helpless maiden would have been the signal of death to both the outlaws.

As it was, the waif of the range now knew that Nellie Belzer was alive; and she did not wish to be discovered by the bandits, as that would ruin her plans.

"Jim," said Doubloon Dan, "make your way up the rocks and take a look over the plain toward the station. We must go through the hearse this morning, in broad daylight, or lose thousands."

"No one will dream of the branch line being attacked; and a bold dash from the cedars, at the turn of the trail around the foothill, will do the biz up brown. Job Jason, the driver, is a green Yankee, and won't buck against us—if he does we'll have to send him 'over the divide."

"Tell Bob to have breakfast ready for the boys, and give each a half pint of whisky, as an appetizer. Look out sharp over the prairie!"

"All right, Cap!"

With these words Jim departed hastily.

Doubloon Dan stood by the couch, speaking as though the sleeping girl could hear and understand him.

"Were it not that I have taken a fancy to Nugget Nell, you, my beauty, should share my cavern home with me. To have met you, and known you to be other than she, has greatly relieved my mind; for I supposed that it was Nell who was searching for this young Ives, and that they were lovers. Had it been so, I would have killed him at sight. But the facts of the case are now clear. You are the betrothed of Ives, and Nugget Nell is merely a wandering waif."

"So much the better for me; for I love her, and that is more than I could say of any woman before I met her. If she, my bright-eyed, brave and darling Nell, will only be mine, I'll quit this life, and we'll live like lord and lady!"

Nugget Nell's lips curled with scorn, for she heard every word. And yet, there was a pride, a triumphant exultation in the glance of her eye; for Nell was but a woman after all.

"But," continued the bandit chief, "I can linger here no longer, my sleeping beauty! I go to capture those who seek your liberty and life."

"I do not understand this business, but I intend to sift the plot to the bottom. They shall not harm you at all events. This Herbert Ives is a lucky dog, and if he does not buck against me too hard, I'll deliver you into his arms."

Throwing a kiss to the sleeping girl, the outlaw chief left the apartment, closing and locking the door behind him.

No sooner did the key grate in the lock, than Nugget Nell crawled from her position, along a dark and narrow passage, entirely round the end of the cave chamber, in which Miss Belzer was confined; reaching, at length, a point, where a long and wide fissure in the walls allowed a view into the cavern occupied by the bandit captain.

The latter entered, at the moment that Nell gained her position; but, from where the girl was perched, she could not be detected from below, as the light of the tapers did not dispel the semi-darkness of the upper portion of the lofty chamber.

Eagerly did Nugget Nell watch the movements of the chief, who, to her joy, held a large key in his hand; the same she knew, with which she had just locked the door of Nellie Belzer's apartment.

This key he placed in a small box on the table.

Then, taking a drink of brandy, he buckled his arms about him, and his spurs on his boots.

At this moment, Jim entered, saying hastily:

"Ther hearse is comin', Cap!"

"How far away, Jim?"

"About five miles, I reckon. She looks no bigger nor a jack-rabbit, at any rate."

"All right. Tell the boys to mount and strike out the gulch to the cedars. I'll be there about as soon as they will."

"O. K., Cap!" said Jim, departing on a run.

In the course of five minutes Doubloon Dan left his chamber, locked the door, and springing upon his horse, followed the arched trail to the gorge, and thence on down to the cedars and the bright sunlight. A black mask now covered a face that, before it had been bloated from drink and stamped with the impress of crime, had been handsome—ay, noble, and matching well his symmetrical frame.

When the bandit chief turned the key in his door, and his heavy tread sounded and echoed in the caverns, Nugget Nell fastened a lariat to a rough, rocky spur, cast the slack through the wide opening in the wall, and quickly descending to the floor of Doubloon Dan's apartment, sprang to the table, opened the box, and secured the key which she had seen him place there, thrusting it into her belt.

This done, she made her way carefully through the opaque gloom to her former lookout.

Once there, she hastily wrote a few lines with a pencil on a piece of paper, wound it about the key, and then threw it down into the chamber of Nellie Belzer, who was still in a death-like slumber.

Having accomplished this much, Nugget Nell said in soliloquy:

"How fortunate it was for all concerned that Doubloon Dan located in the caverns that I know so well."

"Sleep on, Nellie Belzer! Sleep peacefully, for the Waif of the Mountains is at work—working for your freedom and happiness."

"Nugget Nell, whose little baby is buried here, sleeping the last sleep in this very cavern, has sworn to save and avenge you!"

"Yes, and while so doing, she will be in part avenging her own terrible wrongs. Doubloon Dan goes now to capture your enemies, and one of them is the dastard who blighted my life. Were it not that I know this I would dash over the plain and warn Job Jason."

"He who calls himself Carl Cole shall die in the bowels of this rocky range in a bandit's cave, but by the hand of the girl whom he wronged and banished from a happy home. Good-by, Nellie Belzer, beautiful Nellie! I go to lead your lover hither—your poor Herbert, who has been so shocked at supposing he had found you in me. I will keep him in that condition for a little longer, and then bring him to you."

With these words Nugget Nell ignited a torch and darted into the dark, narrow passage by which she had gained her position, soon after emerging in a clump of cedars on the mountain side, in the broad glare of the glorious sunlight.

CHAPTER XXIV.

EXCITEMENT IN CHICO.

THE same morning that Doubloon Dan ordered a mount, and then followed his band to the cedars, and but a half-hour previous, Job Jason started from the station, at the creek on the main line, for Chico City with three "insides."

His attention was attracted and held by the peculiar actions of these three passengers.

He noticed that two of them—a man of middle age, and a much younger woman of great beauty, but whose presence occasioned in him feelings of aversion which he could not understand—rushed to his coach in great haste, past the third passenger, whom they seemed anxious to avoid.

They then took the back seat, the woman vailing her face, and the man pulling his slouch hat over his brows.

However, Job did not think these precautions at all necessary, for the remaining passenger was old and infirm, walking with difficulty.

Indeed, he seemed but just recovered from severe illness; and not only this, but he had the appearance of being what Job termed "off his cabase," for he gazed fixedly downward as he walked, not noticing anything or anybody.

Job had assisted the old man into the coach, and as he "snapped up," and the "hearse" rolled over the prairie, he speculated much in regard to what connection his passengers might be to each other, but without arriving at any very definite conclusion.

He did, indeed, decide that the man and woman on the back seat were not friends of the old party; in fact, it was quite evident from the glances that the woman had shot toward him, previous to his entering the stage, that she was his enemy to the death.

When the old man—who was none other than Major Belzer—sat down upon the forward seat, he leaned upon his cane in a half-dazed state, his face expressing great mental agony; not even glancing toward those in the back seat, who were, as the reader has probably surmised, Carl and Lucretia Cole.

Had Job Jason known the gist of the whispered conversation between the pair of conspirators, he would have stopped the coach, and taken the old man with him on the outside.

Perhaps four miles had been passed over since leaving the station, and during this time Carl and Lucretia had engaged in a whispered debate, the latter and most important part of which we will recount. It explains their hopes and fears at the same time.

"I tell you, Carl, it must be done," said Lucretia, in a decided tone, although not loud enough to be overheard by Major Belzer. "I am almost positive that Nellie is in this town ahead. All our reasonings point to such a decision; and if the old major meets her, I fear it will defeat all our plans. Carl, you must kill him now, and throw his body out of the coach window!"

"We can say he was insane, and that he stabbed himself and then sprang out. But, hold! I have a better plan still."

"We will kill the old man and throw him out. Then I will shriek until the driver halts the coach. He

will see him on the plain, and will drive back after him. When he gets down to lift him into the coach I will shoot the driver. Then you can drive into Chico City, and we will affirm that we were attacked by bandits, who killed the old man and the driver, and robbed us."

"That would be too thin," asserted Carl. "The bandits would slash the mail-bags, rob the mails and burst open the express-box."

"All of which we can do very easily," said the gentle Lucretia; "besides, in that way adding to our capital."

"Suppose we are searched? Then we would be strung up to a limb without the formality of a trial."

"I'll carry the plunder myself. They do not search or hang ladies on the frontier."

"I don't like the business," said Carl, shaking his head.

"I don't care whether you like it or not! It has got to be done. We are playing for a big stake, and can't afford to make a missdeal. I did think you were man enough to carry this thing through if I planned it all out."

"I'll hurl the old codger out of the coach, if that will do you, and by his appearance I should judge the shock will finish him. He has probably been ill for a long time at San Miguel, where he crawled into the stage on the main line. I swear I was never so dumfounded in my life as when I saw him. It seems the devil himself is playing into your hands."

As he spoke Carl Cole took a flask of brandy from his pocket, and drank several swallows.

"Now you begin to talk sense," said the female plotter. "I believe you are right. The fall will kill him; and in the event of matters going wrong, we will not be in such a suspicious fix as we should if he were stabbed. Don't linger, for it is only ten miles to the range. The town is in the foot-hills, they say, which will prevent anything connected with this affair from being observed."

"I reckon we're in for it," said Carl, "so here goes!" And pulling his hat still lower over his face, he sprang over the black belts of the middle seats, grasped the emaciated form of Major Belzer, and hurled the old man, head-foremost, out of the window of the coach.

Not an outcry, not a word of remonstrance, not a struggle for life did the invalid make.

The stage rolled on for a moment, and then Lucretia filled the air with her shrieks.

Job Jason pulled up instantly, amazed at the sounds behind him. Then, glancing back, he saw the form of the old man stretched on the plain.

At once he recalled the fact that his aged passenger had appeared to be demented, and concluded he had sprung from the coach window; the apparent enmity of the other parties toward the invalid slipping the driver's mind.

Circling his team around, Job drove near to where the old man lay, and pulled up, springing to the ground, at the same time crying out:

"What was the matter with him? Did he jump out?"

As the driver asked this question, Carl sprang from the coach, murderous passion in his brandy-inflamed face, and bounded toward Job, knife uplifted. Fortunately the latter had retained his whip in his hand; and, not having time to draw weapon, he struck, with the butt of it, his would-be murderer to the earth!

No sooner, however, had Carl sunk to the ground, than Lucretia, her eyes flashing fury, leveled a revolver at Job, and commenced firing; the first ball passing through the fleshy part of his arm.

This so maddened Job Jason, that he grasped the senseless body of Carl, hurling him through the coach window, full upon the furious female fiend, knocking her to the bottom of the coach; then catching up Major Belzer, and placing him on his own seat outside, Job sprang up, and dashed over the plain toward Chico City, knowing that the man he had knocked down would not recover for some time, and that this would probably prevent the woman from jumping out of the stage.

But Job cared little whether they sprang out or not; for he knew they could be easily caught on the plain by any pursuing party, starting out after he had reached Chico.

On rattled the coach, Job plying his whip without mercy, and glancing back, now and then, to make sure that these desperate characters had not escaped.

But before reaching the turn in the trail, that would bring the burg into view, Job Jason saw a sight he had never dreamed of seeing on the branch line—a sight that stupefied him for the moment.

It was nothing more nor less than the masked riders of Doubloon Dan, who spurred from the cedars and surrounded the "hearse." Two of the number grasped the bridles of the leaders, and brought the team to a halt; at the same time, loud, clear and commanding, rung the order:

"Up with your hands, Job Jason, or die in your boots!"

So infuriated had Job been made by the recent tragic occurrence, he believing his aged passenger to be dead, and having concluded that he would be made famous by taking the two murderers into Chico, that his judgment was for once warped.

Instead of obeying the order of the outlaw chief, he attempted to jerk his revolver. The next instant he fell to the foot-board, and rolled under the seat, with half-a-dozen bullet wounds in his body.

It was quick work now with the bandits.

The mail-bags and express-box were taken by two men, who galloped instantly into the cedars.

The first who looked into the coach, got a bullet through his brain; which so frightened the others, that the doors were jerked open on each side, and Carl, who was senseless, and Lucretia, who again attempted to use her revolver, were dragged out, disarmed, bound, and hurried away. Lucretia, by her fierce outcries, forced the bandits to gag her.

Major Belzer, they found, was still alive.

A letter in his pocket proved to Doubloon Dan that he was a man whom he wanted; so he also was hurried toward the caverns.

The traces were now cut, and the horses driven into the thicket and secured; and, in ten minutes not a bandit was anywhere to be seen on the trail.

Poor Job Jason, nearer dead than alive, crawled out from under the seat, lowered himself to the earth, and crept on hands and knees along the trail to Chico; there arriving, to die among his friends.

At once there was the greatest excitement in the burg.

Hank Hall called a public meeting in Pilgrim's Palace, to organize the citizens, in order that they might follow the trail and "clean out" the band.

It is perhaps needless to mention that the "Terrantaler o' Taos" was not included in the assemblage.

Upon hearing the dying words of Job Jason, this worthy sneaked out the back door of the "Palace," caught up the half-emptied demijohn, mounted his horse and galloped toward the range; prudently proceeding in such a manner, as to keep some clumps of cedars between himself and the town.

He well knew that it was his Santa Fe employers who had been captured by Doubloon Dan; and he felt that he was being defrauded of his rights.

The bandit chief was as cunning as a fox.

He felt sure that the citizens would organize at once and trace him up; consequently he determined upon a bold and reckless move.

Quickly forming his plans, when he arrived at the gulch, he ordered Carl and Lucretia to be taken to his own apartment, and left there bound; directing also that Major Belzer should be laid upon the couch in the same room and tenderly cared for.

Carl having by this time recovered was cursing like a pirate, and berating Lucretia; who, for once in her life, was unable to make a reply.

Leaving half-a-dozen of his men to guard the entrance to the caverns, the arched passage and the gulch, he collected the remainder, a score in number, and yelled:

"Come on, boys! We go to avenge Bud and Bill! We'll show the bummers of Chico City what we're made of. Come! Follow Doubloon Dan, the Devil of the Divide!"

A loud cheer rung out, and all dashed at headlong speed toward Chico. But when near the rear of Pilgrim's Palace they proceeded with caution.

The rear door was open, and a crowd was in the bar. Hank Hall was addressing the citizens in a loud voice.

"Close up, boys, and draw sixes!" ordered the bandit chief. "Follow me right through Pilgrim's Palace, in the back and out the front door; picking triggers lively all the time! All ready?"

"All set, Cap," came in a chorus of voices.

"Git up and git!"

Bending his head to his horse's mane, the outlaw and his steed flew through the rear door, followed close after by his band in a line. On they went, trampling the mass of terrified men beneath the hoofs, and, dashing the screen to the floor, flew like the gale into the street.

Yells, shrieks, mad oaths and groans filled Pilgrim's Palace, though but faintly heard amid the tramp of frenzied steeds and the rattling fusillade of revolver-shots.

Twelve of the masked riders bounded one by one out of the front door to join their chief, eight having been left dead or dying on the floor of the bar-room.

On they dashed into the cedars toward the wash-out, that led to the vicinity of their stronghold.

It was a disastrous dash for Doubloon Dan; but what cared he for the loss of a few men, when he knew that twice that number of the citizens of Chico had been killed. The burg would now be demoralized, and he would have time to escape down the range.

Cunning as he was, however, Doubloon Dan was doomed to be as dumfounded with disaster and death as he had caused Chico City to be.

The fact that two noted scouts and outlaw hunters were encamped at the head of the gulch had entirely slipped his mind.

CHAPTER XXV.

CARL IS CORRALED.

Rocky Mountain Al and Broncho Jim, as they awakened in the early hours of the morning, after conferring together, concluded to remain in their camp during the day.

Their companions agreed with them for various reasons.

First, Charley Ives was not yet in a fit condition to travel; secondly, Herbert was in a state of mind that was torturing. He paced back and forth with folded arms, scarce seeming to realize where he was, unable to see how, as George Belzer kept assuring him, all things would turn out well.

Al did not wish to act contrary to the advice of Nugget Nell, in whom he had great confidence. He felt sure that the "Terrantaler" was in some way mixed up in Major Belzer's and Nellie's affairs, and not for their benefit.

"Don't you fret, Mr. Ives," said the scout to Herb; "I'll gladly take this adventurous young lady off your hands, and be the proudest man in New Mexico if she will say the word."

"You needn't laugh, Jim—I mean biz. I'll own up that girl makes me wilt into my boots. She's just what a scout's wife should be—brave as a lion, graceful as a fawn, and daring as a Comanche on his first war-path."

Al now occupied his time in putting their arms in order, while Broncho Jim made his way down the range and got possession of his horse, not having the remotest idea of having been in the vicinity of the caverns of Doubloon Dan and his gang of outlaws.

Thus the time passed, until suddenly all sprung for their rifles, a yell reaching their ears from up the gulch.

Gazing upward, they discovered Nugget Nell upon what appeared to be an inaccessible cliff; but waving her hand in salutation, she stepped back, and was lost to view. Soon again, however, the strange girl appeared; this time down the gulch, at the bend of the same.

"Leave your horses and follow me!" she cried. Ask no questions, but follow me, and be silent as the grave."

"Come on, boys," said Al. "There's fun ahead, or I'm a liar. Pard Jim, keep an eye on Little Pard."

"Don't fear for me," said Charley; "I'm able to take care of myself. I'll not be caught asleep this time."

The men now buckled their belts a hole tighter, and slipped their revolvers and knives around, ready for use. Rocky Mountain Al was already speeding after Nugget Nell, and all, in a run, followed in single file. The Waif of the Rockies led them into a thicket on the side of the gulch, which wound up-

ward; but which, from below, seemed but an irregular line on the rocky wall, and upon which no one would suppose that a foot-hold could be maintained.

Not a word spoke Nugget Nell, but on and up she tripped, Al walking in long and rapid strides, but without being able to overtake her.

On and on, at times bounding or climbing to a higher shelf, went the girl along the side of the range; at last traversing a more easy route, amid cedars, dwarf-pine and cacti. At length she surmounted a huge projecting spur of the mountain, and then glided downward into a winding crevice. The scout found himself able to place a hand against either wall, as he walked along.

This crevice came to an end abruptly, and a clump of cedars grew at the terminus, into which Neil quickly passed. Here all soon gathered around her, in wonder and curiosity, as she ignited a pine knot, a number of which lay at her feet.

"Herb," said the strange girl, familiarly, but without looking at the young engineer, "follow close after me. Al will take charge of Charley if Broncho Jim is not sufficient guard. Be careful of the rough rocks; there are some places where we shall have to crawl."

"Herb," she said again, "why do you look so strange? Why have your feelings so changed toward one who has braved every danger on the border to come up with you? Why is this thusly?"

There was a most tantalizing and comical look in the eyes of Nugget Nell as she thus spoke, which perplexed Herbert beyond belief, torturing him greatly, while his heart was wrung with his conflicting fears and fancies.

Throwing off these strange feelings, born of the fact that the innocent and childlike maiden whom he had loved so devotedly had become so changed—a change for which he felt that he was responsible—he grasped the hand of the Waif of the Range, and cried out in a hoarse and unnatural voice:

"Forgive me, Nellie; forgive me! I am true and loyal, but I fear that these dangers and horrors have demoralized us all and made us strange even to ourselves. I am far from being unkind, however, of the great sacrifices you have made for me—"

Nugget Nell snatched her hand from Herbert's grasp.

"All will yet be well," she said, with a laugh. "The curtain is about to rise; and then, a heavy load will be lifted from your mind and heart. Excuse my mirth. I know it is unseemly. Follow, all! Follow Nugget Nell, the magician of the Mountains, whose war-cry is 'Presto, change!'"

Herbert, George and Charley, who had known Nellie Belzer so well, and who supposed that she and Nugget Nell were one and the same, were now fully convinced that she was insane. George grasped Herbert's hand, in deep sympathy, as they set out to follow this strange guide into the bowels of the mountain.

Rocky Mountain Al knew well that the girl was playing a part, and he fully believed that she was indifferent to the love or dislike of Herbert Ives; although there was a mystery about it all, that puzzled even the scout, with his deep knowledge of men and things.

Soon Nell reached the cleft in the wall of the cave-chamber, in which Nellie Belzer was confined.

Herbert was now close to her side, and she pressed him to a sitting posture. Then, casting a quick glance below, she saw that Nellie still slept, and she spoke in a low voice.

"Range yourselves along in a line, pards, and squat. Don't gaze over until I give the word."

"Boys, the mystery is about to be solved! See; I attach my lariat to this spur of rock. The slack reaches to the floor of the cavern, and by it we can descend. Herbert, you shall go first; you, George Belzer next; and then, Little Pard."

"We are about to enter the secret retreat of Doubloon Dan. Now, bend forward, and gaze at one of his prisoners. Presto, change!"

"Herbert Ives, below there is one who, weak and unprotected, has braved the wilds of the West in her search for you. Pards, look downwards!"

All bent forward, half-smothered ejaculations of deepest wonder breaking from their lips.

Below, in the cavern, upon a couch of skins, lay Nellie Belzer asleep; her pale face, and long golden hair forming a striking contrast to her surroundings.

Herbert Ives grasped a hand of Nugget Nell, and then fell upon his knees.

The scene was so unexpected, so astounding, in fact so incomprehensible to all, except Nugget Nell, who witnessed it, that they gazed in silence.

"Come on, pards!" ordered the Waif of the Range breaking the spell; "you, George and Charley, descend lively; for, if I mistake not, we shall soon have our hands full. Al and Broncho Jim, the time has come for work. The Pumas are doomed, and Doubloon Dan has gone through the last 'hearse.' I assert it—I, Nugget Nell!"

All now descended; and, as the last one reached the rock floor, Nellie Belzer sprang to a sitting posture, and stared wildly around her.

"Nellie!" exclaimed the Waif of the Mountains; "look around you—your trials are over!"

"Nellie! my darling Nellie, don't you know me?" cried Herbert, springing forward.

At last the lovers were united.

Even Broncho Jim brushed a tear from his eyes on his buckskin sleeve; but Nugget Nell was still bent on business. Quickly she climbed the lariat, and calling upon Al and Jim to follow her, soon all three disappeared, without explanation, taking the key of the apartment. Five minutes later, they stood in the chamber of the bandit chief, viewing his captives.

"No time for meditation or contemplation, pards," said Nell. "Draw sixes, and plug every bandit we meet, from here to the arched entrance. Come on, boys! Follow me!"

"For my sake, Nell, stay where you are!" said Al. "Jim and I will attend to the followers of Doubloon Dan."

With these words, out rushed the scouts, past the daring girl. Then followed some scattering shots, and the men soon returned. Nell stood pale and trembling, her eyes fixed upon the prostrate and fast-bound form of the man who was known as Carl Cole.

"Take them up and follow me," she said. "I have the key of the cavern where we left our friends,

Al, bring the old gentleman. Jim, you fetch the woman!"

The scouts obeyed. Nugget Nell opened the door to the next apartment, and Major Belzer was soon placed by the side of his daughter.

Nell had again to break the silence that ensued.

"Rocky Mountain Al, will you have the goodness to convey the miscreant from the other cavern into this? When you have done so, throw a robe over him, or I shall mar this happy scene, by a tragedy!"

It was done as the girl requested.

As Al passed her, she closed the door with a clang, and turned the key, saying:

"Now, I may call myself happy. I have my dearest friends, and my deadliest enemy corraled."

"The dastard whom you have laid in that corner, bound and helpless, is the one who blighted my life, took me from a happy home, and left me a waif upon the world!"

"In this very cavern my child is buried. For twelve months I roamed this range, a maniac. Then, my reason returned, and I began to live for revenge."

"I found gold in abundance, and I have used it in the prosecution of my search for the coward and villain who, by a mock marriage, darkened my life."

"But my time has come, Robert Rogers! You, who have traveled since under the name of Carl Cole, and who married that female fiend with whom you confederated to murder Major Belzer and his daughter—you, my betrayer, shall never leave the cavern of Doubloon Dan, once the retreat of myself and my child!"

"He dies—dies by the hand of Nugget Nell, the Waif of the Range!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

WRONGS RIGHTED.

NUGGET NELL was terrible in her frantic rage, and her thirst for revenge. All realized how strong must have been her control over herself, when she could, for a moment, leave the man who had so wronged her, to aid others. And this strength of will was again exercised; for, the girl now set her teeth, and leaning against the wall of the cavern, closed her eyes and remained silent. Thus she tried to smother her intense longing for vengeance, in order that she might not mar the happiness of those who had so strangely and providentially been brought together.

While she stood thus, Rocky Mountain Al stole silently to her side, and taking one of her little hands in his, said, in gentle and loving tones:

"Little Nell, all this wrings my heart. It is torture to me to witness your agony. Nellie, I love you! Let me avenge you. Say that you will be mine, and I will turn over every boulder on the range to make you happy—to drive from your mind every thought of the past. Speak to me—"

Al was here interrupted by an outcry from the dimly lighted corner, in which he had left Carl Cole.

"Nellie Nolan," called out the man, whom we must now call Robert Rogers; "come here! I wish to say a word that will cause you to change your mind, and at the same time relieve you from much anguish and shame, that you have wrongfully suffered."

Al led the unresisting girl toward the speaker. She was now trembling from head to foot.

As the pair advanced, Robert Rogers again spoke:

"Nellie Nolan, I have been a very bad man, but not as bad as you think. I was not, when I married you, what I have become since—a thief, a forger, and a murderer! Our marriage was legal, and I deceived you only when I represented that it was not."

"I could not support you, and at the same time live in the style that I wished; so, knowing you had a good home to which you might return, I deserted you, and deceived you in regard to our relations with each other."

"Our marriage-certificate is in my valise, in the hind boot of the coach, upon which myself and that she-demon, Lucretia Lane, came from the main line. Instigated by her, I did what I have done. Then the bandits attacked us, and we are here."

"She, Lucretia Lane, who, I am thankful to be able to say, is no wife of mine, induced me to come West, in search of Major Belzer, her step-father, and his daughter, for the purpose of murdering them and securing the property. She had previously forced the old man—having weakened his brain by drugs—to make a will in her favor, thus disinheriting his own daughter. She then had him incarcerated in an insane asylum."

"He escaped; but previous to this, Nellie disappeared."

"Knowing that Herbert Ives, to whom she was betrothed, was in the mountains, Lucretia decided that Nellie had come here in search of him. She also thought it probable that the major, upon escaping, had followed his daughter."

"At Santa Fe a burly ruffian, who called himself the Tarantula of Taos, was hired to capture or kill both the major and Nellie."

"The resemblance of the latter to you, Nellie Rogers, was what brought about my acquaintance in the first place, with my evil genius, Lucretia Lane, who, if she be allowed to live, will sooner or later murder you all; for she will commit any crime, without compunction, to carry out her ends."

"I make this confession, not to influence you, Nellie, toward favoring me, but because I feel sure that my end is near. For the misery I have caused you I am truly penitent; and had I any claim upon it, I would ask your forgiveness."

"Had I remained with you I should not now be the guilty, hopeless wretch that I am. But I can at least relieve you, Nellie, of the misery and shame of supposing you had never been a wife."

"Our marriage was duly recorded at the little village outside of St. Louis where we were united, on that stormy night when you were so nervous and terrified that you did not notice your surroundings."

As Rogers ceased speaking, Nell sunk to her knees, and Al crouched by her side, feeling utterly bewildered.

He felt that this confession of the man Roberts, although it had removed a mountain of misery from Nugget Nell, had plunged him into the depths of despondency and hopelessness.

During this time, Charley and George sat on the

foot of the couch, while Herbert and Nellie supported Major Belzer and strove to revive him.

To describe their feelings would be impossible. We must leave it to the imagination of the reader, who is conversant with their relations, and can judge what their emotions must have been, thus strangely re-united in a bandit cave in the Rocky Mountains.

Broncho Jim was the "most mixed-up pilgrim" in New Mexico.

Muttering "Dang my cats! This hyer's ormighty flustercatin' doin's!" he stole to the side of the couch, and grasping the brandy-bottle, from which George had been administering a stimulant to the old major, he took a generous "pull" at it, saying, in soliloquy:

"Dang'd ef I doesn't git es drunk es a fresh ration'd Plute, ef thar ain't a change in ther programme, an' some biz started soon thet ain't so cussed far from my reg'lar trails!"

"Thar's too much soft sodder mixed in for Broncho Jim," he continued—"too much angel-ness an' cussedness tryin' ter scrouge each other off ther ledge. They can't mix; and pard Al needn't ter try an' hitch onter caliker, leavin' me ter suck mar-rer-bones alone."

And "reg'lar biz" was started soon.

Before Jim had swallowed a second drink, there arose a series of vengeful yells at the arched entrance of the cavern.

"Pards," cried out Nugget Nell, as she sprung to her feet, "prepare for a desperate fight. Doubloon Dan and his band have returned. They will battle like fiends; but we are secure, and need not open the door unless we choose."

"However, we shall be obliged to climb the lariat, and traverse those narrow, dangerous shelves, or else make a dash through the outlaw horde. Both moves are at present impossible, through the condition of Nellie Belzer and her father."

"But, hark! I really think the citizens have followed them."

"You are right, Nell," said Al; "and we must assist in breaking up this band of demons."

"Now ye're gittin' nat'ral ag'in, pard," said Broncho Jim. "Dang'd ef I didn't think yer'd gone lunny er spooney, an' war spec'latin' on whar yer'd find a faver'ble section to start a sheep ranch."

Al pretended not to have heard this, but to be listening to the din outside.

Wild yells, pistol, and rifle-shots now sounded from the arched entrance of the cavern, and the scouts felt sure that the citizens had now cut the outlaws completely off from escape.

Reasoning from the sounds that the bandits were all engaged in preventing their foes from gaining an entrance to the cave, the two scouts cried out:

"Come, Herb and George! If you want a little practice in a lively kind of circus, follow us. We must help the 'citz' of Chico, and clean out Doubloon Dan. We've got the dead-wood on them—a surprise in their rear. Nell, I beg of you, stay here and protect these helpless ones. Charley, remain, too; and unlock the door when either of us yells."

"Charley can attend to the door," said Nugget Nell; "I go with the crowd. I want a chance at the 'Terrantaler o' Taos!'"

Knowing that it was useless for him to reason with Nell, Al jerked his revolver, as did also Jim, Herbert, and George; and all five darted out of the door, Charley locking it, and listening at the key-hole, as if the moment was pregnant with life and death.

A thundering report soon sounded, and Charley decided that his friends had discharged all ten of their revolvers at a given signal. This was followed by groans rallying cries, and shrieks of agony, mingled with scattering volleys from six-shooters; but the attention of Charley, fixed as it had been upon outside sounds, was drawn by a shriek within the cave-chamber, followed by an outcry of horror.

Turning quickly Little Pard beheld a sight that caused his tongue to cleave to the roof of his mouth, and his young blood to congeal in his veins.

Lucretia, the bound and gagged captive, had freed herself, and was now bent over the man whom she had supposed to be her husband; who had married her, under the name of Carl Cole.

A glittering knife was in her hand, upraised over the breast of the helpless man; she, gazing with murderous hatred and triumph into the eyes of her victim. As Charley looked on, in speechless horror, the deadly blade descended, grating through bones with sickening sound, the red blood spurting up over the arm and face of the murderess!

Up and down again, shot the knife, a heart-rending groan of horror and agony filling the cavern, and then, all was over. The murder-maddened female fiend arose to her full height, her black eyes flashing, as she looked now at the couch upon which reclined Major Belzer and Nellie.

The old man seemed suddenly to regain his senses, and judgment, as he caught sight of the infamous woman who had so terribly wronged him—who had usurped his daughter's place, causing that daughter, as well as himself, to be a wanderer in these savage wilds; having first incarcerated him in a mad-house.

Trembling at the first, his half-palsied hand fumbled in his breast-pocket; then he became firm as a rock, his eyes blazing, as he sat unsupported on the couch. Nellie Belzer, with closed eyes and clasped hands, murmured prayers for protection from this new and unexpected danger.

Only a moment did this terrible tableau last.

Lucretia sprang toward the couch, knife in hand, and murder in her eyes.

Charley Ives uttered a piercing cry, and darted forward, revolver in hand; but, before he could gain a position between the couch and the would-be murderess, he saw the arm of Major Belzer thrust forward, holding a glittering weapon.

A blinding flash followed, and then a sounding report.

Lucretia threw up both her arms, the blood-stained knife fell on the stone floor; then the woman floundered downward, a gurgling cry, terrible to the ears of the horror-stricken girl and youth, left her lips.

The dread sight caused Charley to cover his eyes with his hands, and when he again looked toward the couch, the murderess lay, outstretched and motionless, a ghastly corpse, her black, sightless eyes glaring glassily in the taper light.

Just then a loud knocking at the door aroused Little Pard, and turning, he unlocked the same, and swung it open. He recognized the faces of his friends; but his heart ceased beating, nearly choking him, as he beheld George Belzer and Nugget Nell supporting the bleeding form of Rocky Mountain Al, his face pale as that of a corpse.

Broncho Jim was brought in by Herbert; and two strangers, apparently very seriously wounded, were carried afterward into the cave-chamber.

Charley was sick and faint with horror; but he braced him self, and ran to bring robes, which he proceeded to spread for the wounded to be laid upon, the cavern soon being filled with a crowd of the citizens of Chico.

Great was the horror and amazement of all when the tragic scene before them was explained by Charley Ives. Nugget Nell was the most dumfounded of all; yet she felt relieved when she knew that the man who had been the curse of her life was no more.

The citizens went to work with a will, and constructing litters, removed the wounded, many of whom were in the gulch outside, to Chico City.

There, a surgeon had fortunately arrived on a traveling tour, the day previous to the robbing of the coach, so the poor fellows received all proper attention.

Major Belzer and his daughter, with the assistance of George and Herbert, walked to the burg, where all needed care and attendance awaited them.

The gambling-room of Pilgrim's Palace was appropriated for a hospital, and everything done that could be done to relieve the wounded, and restore them to their normal state of health.

CHAPTER XXVII.

FROM NIGHT, LIGHT.

DEAR readers, a general "round up" of the events that transpired when Major Belzer and Nellie were sufficiently strong to travel, and Rocky Mountain Al, together with his pard, Broncho Jim, had recovered from their wounds, is now in order, and must, with a "staking out" of characters, close our story.

Although Chico City received a hard blow through the Pumas of Doubloon Dan, the burg was not long in recuperating, as the very fact that the town had been the scene of the liveliest "circus" of any burg on the range, and boasted of the most extensive "plant of stiffs" in one day, was the best kind of an advertisement.

It drew many "pilgrims," or "old timers," from up and down the Rockies; in fact double the number of those who proved "solid citz" than had been killed in the desperate dash of Doubloon Dan and his followers through Pilgrim's Palace, and the fight that ensued, were, in a little time, located there.

The "Tarrantaler o' Taos," by the way, was not seen in the closely-contested "shooting match" at the cavern entrance, nor in the burg afterward; and whether he struck deep into the cedars, and deeper still into the demijohn of whisky, resulting in "snakes in his boots," making a "hatch of it," and culminating in his demise by rolling down the range in reality—or, whether his "iron heart" is still on the "ding-dong," the writer is unable to state.

Much to the joy and relief of Nugget Nell the certificate of her marriage was found in the baggage of Robert Rogers, as the unhappy man had asserted it could be.

A driver was obtained to replace poor Job Jason; and, one bright morning, the old "hearse" rolled out of Chico City with more precious freight—in our estimation—than ever before. In fact, it was full, inside and out.

Inside sat Major Belzer, Nellie, George, Herbert, and Charley; while outside, where they could sniff the prairie air, more freely, were perched Nugget Nell, Broncho Jim, and Rocky Mountain Al.

When they reached the main line, all alighted at the station, to await the stage from down country; the two scouts intending to remain in New Mexico, while our young friends, with the old major, and Nugget Nell—from whom Nellie Belzer would not consent to be parted—were to journey north, and then east, to the old mansion, at the Palisades on the noble Hudson.

The agreement, entered into between the various members of our party, was, that at the end of a year all were to meet at the home of Major Belzer. Al and Jim to leave their mountain and prairie haunts for the purpose. That then, the grand reunion should be celebrated by the marriage of Rocky Mountain Al and Nugget Nell; also, the union of George Belzer with the fair Miss Ada Johnson, to whom we have heard him refer.

The marriage of Miss Nellie Belzer to Mr. Herbert Howard Ives was, as a matter of course, understood to have a prominent place assigned it among the anticipated festivities.

We will just say that this programme was carried out to the very letter; the old mansion and grounds being illuminated in grand style, and many distinguished guests being present.

Major Belzer appeared younger, by twenty years, than when he rode through the gulch, in a half insane state, into the Apache camp, and by his strange appearance was the means of saving the life of Rocky Mountain Al.

After the wedding, the mansion was left in the care of the old and faithful servant, who had assisted his master, when the latter escaped from the insane asylum, and sought to follow his missing daughter into the western wilds.

All then went on an extended marriage tour to the Rocky Mountains—not forgetting to visit Chico City—thence they went to Santa Fe, and from that to Las Vegas.

Here Rocky Mountain Al established his home, with his bride, once known as "Nugget Nell, the Walf of the Range," and there, at the present writing, he remains—a scout and hunter, well known in New Mexico, as well as a frontier correspondent for the Las Vegas Daily Gazette.

There we bury the trials and wrongs of Nellie Nolan Rogers, and hail the dawn of a long day of happiness, which we doubt not is to shine for her and her friend and counterpart, Nellie Ives.

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